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BELINDA

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A Novel.

BY

RHODA BROUGHTON,

AUTHOR OF

'COMETH UP AS A FLOWER,' 'RED AS A ROSE IS SHE,' 'SECOND THOUGHTS,' 'GOOD-BYE, SWEETHEART,' 'NANCY,' ETC.

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IN THREE VOLUMES.

VOL. II.

LONDON:

RICHARD BENTLEY AND SON,

Publishers in Ordinary to Her Majesty the Queen.

1883.

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BELINDA

PERIOD II.—continued.

CHAPTER III.

THE year declines towards its mirk close. Every day a little more is taken from the light and added to the dark. London is full and cheerful; with a pleasanter, friendlier, more leisurely social stir than the overpowering June one. Two or three good pieces are running at the theatres, and the shop-windows are warm with furs. Round the Churchills a crop of small dinners and dances has sprung up.

The time nears mid-December. Mrs. Churchill's wish as to the non-repetition of Professor Forth's visit has met with the usual fate of wishes. He has come again repeatedly; so repeatedly that the dogs

have ceased barking at him, though they are not so hypocritical as to wag their tails on his approach; nor, indeed, does he ever, by kind pats or well-chosen civilities, give them any cause to do so. Even the obtuse Tommy has learned that he is to be shown, not into the drawing-room, but into the little back litter-room, which has been arbitrarily cleared of Sarah's paint-pots, and the promiscuous rubbish in which her soul delights; has been furnished with pens, ink, and dictionaries, and raised and dignified by the name of study. For Belinda's fervour for learning rages with a feverish heat that might make a thoughtful looker-on inclined to question its solidity or its continuance.

She is learning Latin Syntax; she is being taught Greek; she has undertaken a course of Universal History; she devotes her spare moments to the Elements of Algebra. Very seldom now does she join her family in the evening. Mostly she remains downstairs, writing Latin Exercises, learning Irregular Greek Verbs;

working, working on until late into the night. She would like never to stop; to leave no single chink or cranny by which memory may enter.

And is the charm working? Is the remedy beginning to make its healing virtue felt? This is the question that she never dares ask herself. Sometimes, indeed, it thrusts itself upon her in the sadness of the night. Sometimes the pen drops from her stiffened fingers, or her tired brain relaxes its hold upon the hard-conned page, and she groans out to herself—she alone awake, with her melancholy gas-jet burning above her in the silence of the sleeping house—"Of what use? what use?" Has it given back to life its sweet and wholesome taste? Has it helped her to dominate that terrible irritability which makes no person and no moment safe from some senseless outbreak of her temper? Has it conquered that gloom which renders her the kill-joy of her little circle. There is not one of these questions that she can honestly answer in the affirmative.

But perhaps there has not yet been time enough to test the efficacy of this cure. Its action will doubtless be slow, but all the more lasting and solid for that. She must persevere; it would be madness not to persevere. She passes her hand across her weary, throbbing temples, and catches up the pen again.

The clocks strike two, and she still writes. It is not night now; it is afternoon. Mrs. Churchill and Sarah, furred and feathered, with their bonnets nicely tied on, and their faces alight with placid good-humour, have set off in the brougham on their daily career of calls and shops.

Belinda remains behind in the little dingy back room, with her copy-books. Not once to-day has she tasted the wholesome outside air—wholesome with all its blacks, and fog-charged as it is. She has been alone here the whole day, except for a couple of ten minutes grudgingly snatched for breakfast and luncheon.

She has been alone, but she is so no longer. Professor Forth has just been

ushered in to partake her solitude. She meets him with a complaint.

"I expected you yesterday."

"I was detained by a College meeting, and by other engagements," he answers. "I hope," ceremoniously, "that you were not inconvenienced by the deferring of my visit?"

"I was," she answered brusquely. "As it happened, I wanted you badly. I was completely puzzled by a passage here," laying her hand upon a school edition of "Cæsar's Commentaries." "I worried over it till I felt quite dazed and woolly."

As she speaks she draws the volume towards her, and they both stoop their heads over the page; his with its old, sparse, colourless hair, thriftily drawn across the baldening crown; hers with its unregarded riches of nut-brown. The difficulty dissipated, she leans back in her chair.

"It is hopeless to make any real progress," she says morosely, "as long as our

lessons are so interrupted. How much better it would be if we lived in Oxbridge! How I wish we lived in Oxbridge!"

She is sitting alongside of him, and does not look at him as she expresses this wish. It seems to be addressed with a general vagueness to the air.

He glances at her, sidelong and suspiciously; at the beautiful blooming profile, the discontented mouth, the fine, petulant, small nose, the veiled, unglad eyes. He has almost given up suspecting her of late, but her last aspiration has rearoused his distrust. Was not Sarah once fervent and constant in her longings to inhabit a university town?

"It would make things so much easier," she continues plaintively, quite unconscious of his disquieting doubts. "If I were in difficulties I could go straight to you. I had much rather live in Oxbridge than here."

He is still observing her covertly, and makes no answer.

"It must be a good life!" she says, with

the same restless longing as a sick person's for strange food; "so full of intelligent interests, so absorbing, and must take one so out of one's self!"

As she speaks she clasps both hands at the back of her neck, and stares dreamily up at the ceiling. He has moved his eyes away from her. Perhaps they are satisfied with the result of their investigation. They now look straight before him on Cæsar's open page. Upon his fingers he balances a paper-knife; and an unusual expression has crept about his narrow lips.

"If you are sincere in your desire for a——" he begins rather slowly; but she breaks in upon him hotly.

"Sincere!" she repeats, with an angry intonation; "I cannot imagine why you preface all your remarks with a doubt of my sincerity! What could I possibly gain by being insincere?"

She looks at him full and irately as she speaks, and their eyes meet; the dull old cautious eyes, and the unhappy flashing young ones.

"If my phrase offends you, I will change it!" he answers formally. "*Since* you are sincere in your desire for a——"

But again he breaks off. There is a ring at the door-bell.

"You have visitors," he says, in an annoyed voice. "We shall be interrupted."

"No, we shall not," she replies, shaking her head. "Tommy knows that when you are here, I am not at home to anyone."

It is a sentence susceptible of a flattering interpretation, that, indeed, would seem to bear no other, but it is uttered as such indifferent matter-of-fact that he would be indeed a coxcomb who was elated by it.

"Please go on," smiling faintly. "Since I am sincere in my desire for—what?"

But apparently he has lost the thread of his twice-begun speech.

"Your servant must have mistaken your directions," he says, with a vexed look; "he is evidently admitting some one."

Both listen, and as she listens Belinda's colour changes.

"If we were at Dresden," she says in a suppressed and troubled voice, "and if I did not hope that it were impossible, I should say that the voice was——"

The door flies open.

"Here I am!" cries Miss Watson, bursting into the room, in apparently the identical large black and white plaid gown and grizzled fringe, and in certainly the same burly red face—perhaps a shade worsened by the battle and breeze—as of yore.

She is not ushered in, but helplessly followed by the baffled Tommy, who is raising his puny infant voice in futile protestations, as his predecessor had so often done before him.

"I knew by Tommy's manner that you were at home!" cries she joyfully. "By-the-bye, he is a new Tommy! What have you done with the old one? I would not give him my card; I said, 'No, I will surprise them!'"

She has succeeded. Both Mr. Forth and his disciple have risen to their feet, and now stand regarding their visitor with a —for the first moments—entirely silent dismay.

"Mr. Forth, too!" cries Miss Watson, snatching his reluctant hand. "Why, this is Dresden over again! If we had but Sarah and Rivers here, we might think ourselves back there."

Neither of Belinda's companions perceives it, but she shudders. Ever since Miss Watson's voice first fell on her shocked ears, she has known that she would have to endure the sound of Rivers' name. In reality not two minutes have elapsed since then, but it seems to her as if for hours she had been dreading it.

"How snug you are!" says the visitor, patronizingly looking round; "but why do you sit here? Why do not you sit in the drawing-room? Is not the fire lit there? Oh, I suppose Sarah sits there, and grandmamma? I must go and pay them a little visit just now."

"They are out."

"Out!" repeats the other, laughing; "Sarah is always out. I wish they would come back! How soon do you expect them? We should be just our Dresden party, then—all but Rivers!"

Again that shudder, but she sets her teeth. She *must* endure it—*must* steel herself to hear his name—to pronounce it if need be.

"Shocking thing about his father, was it not?" continues Miss Watson, cheerfully pursuing the course of thought suggested by the mention of Rivers. "Failed for over a million, and cut his throat. They say that he has left his large family—twelve? ten? nine?—how many used young Rivers to tell us there were of them?—upon the parish. But I do not believe it; one hears of people bankrupt one day, and rolling in their carriages the next."

Belinda's heart is beating sickeningly, and her hands are trembling so violently that she has to clench them fast together;

to hide their aguish shaking; but she is nerving herself up. Here is an opportunity for obtaining information about him such as may probably not recur for weeks, months, possibly years. Here, too, is an occasion for practising that indifferent naming of him to which she is resolved to attain.

"Does Mr. Rivers roll in his carriage?" she asks, with a strained smile.

The effort to speak is so great that it seems to her as if, when it is overcome, she speaks unnaturally loud; but, as her companions show no surprise, she concludes that it cannot be so really.

"I do not know about rolling in his carriage," answers Miss Watson, with her loud, ever-ready laugh; "I know that he can treat himself to stalls at the theatre, which is more than I can. I always go to the dress circle; one's legs are a little cramped in the front row, but one can see as well as in the best place in the house."

Belinda has stooped over the table, and is nervously arranging, rearranging, dis-

arranging the exercise-books, grammars, pen-wipers upon it.

"Did you see him at the play?" she asks hurriedly.

"I saw him the other night at the St. James's," returns Miss Watson, inquisitively following with her eyes Belinda's unaccountable fidgetings. "What are you looking for? have you lost anything? No?—At the St. James. 'The Squire'—have you seen it? it is so well put on the stage—Mrs. Kendal quite at her best!"

"I—I think not," answers Belinda incoherently. "I mean no; I—I have not seen it. You were saying——"

"What was I saying?" (her eyes still fastened curiously on the girl's purposeless movements)—"you *must* have lost something!—oh! that I had seen young Rivers at the play. He was in the stalls with a lady—his sister, we will presume—though she was not at all like him," with a knowing look. "If *she* was on the parish, it managed to dress her uncommonly well!"

Even Belinda's lips have turned white.

She is conscious of it, and rubs them hard with her fingers. He is in London! He can go to the play, can take his pleasure with other women! She has long known in theory that he must have been frequently in London during the past eighteen months; but never before has it come home to her with such cruel practical certitude. Lightning-quick the contrast between their evenings—his and hers—has sprung before her eyes: her melancholy vigils, devoted to distasteful studies in the vain hope of wrenching her thoughts away from him; and *his*, reclining in mirthful ease in a comfortable fauteuil in the lit theatre, beside a beautiful, strange, fond woman. The beauty and the fondness her sick imagination has at once supplied. That she may possibly have been his sister, her bitter soul refuses for one instant to admit.

"I tried to get to him as we were going out," pursues Miss Watson narratively. "I saw him on ahead with his lady. He is a most attentive *brother!*" with a laughing

accent on the word; "he was wrapping her up like a mummy! But though I made a great push for it I could not come up with him; there was such a crowd. I never saw a fuller house. I called out to him, and once I thought he had heard, for he looked round and caught my eye; but it could not have been so, for he posted on faster than before!"

At this in happier moments Belinda would have smiled. She cannot smile now.

Have not you seen anything of him?" asks the other, exploring the girl's wan face with the unflinching inquisitiveness of her eyes; "has not he been to call—not once? I must tell him that there is a hole in his manners; I shall be sure to fall in with him again before long, and I will send him here. I will tell him that you expect him."

"You will not," says Belinda hoarsely, stretching out her hand and turning livid. "I mean," helped back to self-possession by the expression of astonished

and eager curiosity painted all over her guest's broad face—"I mean that I think I had rather you did not. If he wishes to call, he—he—knows our address."

CHAPTER IV.

IT is next day. Outside, snow is falling; but it is flabby, irresolute, large-flaked snow, that melts as it reaches the slushy street, and makes it slushier still. Mrs. Churchill is standing by the window, eyeing the weather with disgust, and Sarah and the dogs are seated higgledy-piggledly on the hearthrug.

"This is what we are to expect for the next five months!" cries Mrs. Churchill, addressing this exasperated remark partly to the outside mud and mirk, and partly to her grand-daughter.

Neither heeds it. Sarah's whole attention, indeed, is occupied in bribing Punch,

by a sweet biscuit brought up from luncheon, to the performance of the most striking in his repertoire of tricks, an affecting representation of death; which, when contrasted with his usual superabundant life, is much admired by strangers, and indeed by his own family.

It is, however, the one of his accomplishments for which he himself has the least partiality. The command to die has to be reiterated many times before he at length rolls reluctantly over on his side; and even then, as he looks up every half a second and jumps up every second, a good deal of the repose of death has to be supplied by the spectator's imagination.

"What a climate!" pursues Mrs. Churchill in angry ejaculation. "Good heavens, Sarah, why do you let Jane make such a dreadful noise?"

She may well ask. Jane, seated on her haunches, is volunteering, in a loud series of forward barks, to die, to beg, to trust, to dance—to do anything of which she is utterly incapable, in order to divert

to herself the attention monopolised by Punch.

Slutty, with her usual poor-spiritedness, has crawled away under a chair in sulky annoyance at her brother's social success.

"How anyone that can help it spends the winter in England, is more than I can imagine!" pursues the old lady, shivering back to the fire. "If we were rid of Belinda we would go abroad."

"Why should not Belinda go too?—No," holding up a finger in severe prohibition of Punch's premature resurrection; "dead! dead! head down! dead!"

"I could not possibly afford it; and besides," with a shrug, "she would spoil the whole thing; she is such a wet blanket."

"Everybody cannot be always on the grin like you and me," answers Sarah with surly disrespect.

"We would go to the South," says Mrs. Churchill, perfectly unmoved by her granddaughter's want of reverence, to which, indeed, she is thoroughly accustomed, her bright old eye lightening at the notion of a

holiday; "we would have a week in Paris, and go to the play every night. I must see Judic in this new piece. We would run over to Monaco and try our luck. If only," her exhilarated tone changing to one of impatient vexation, "if only Belinda were out of the way!"

Mrs. Churchill is far too much of an old gentlewoman to speak loud, but her utterance is distinct and pure; she does not swallow all the tails of her words, as we English are accused of doing. It would be impossible for anyone entering the room not to hear her; more particularly as Jane has at length been persuaded to cease favouring the company with her remarks.

Sarah lifts her head. She had an impression as of the door softly closing. In a moment a sudden thought has made her hustle aside the dogs, spring up, and fly out on the landing. She was right. Sure enough, Belinda is slowly descending the stairs, with her back to her sister. Even before she turns her face, which in

obedience to her junior's call she does, Sarah knows somehow by the look of her back that she has heard. She is in walking-dress, and is evidently making for the hall-door.

"Are you going out?" asks Sarah, with as guilty a face and voice as if she herself, and not her grandmother, had been the author of the ill-natured remarks so unfortunately overheard.

"Yes."

"To-day?" shivering.

"Yes."

"Alone?"

"Yes."

"Walking?"

"No."

"In a hansom?"

"Yes."

"Where are you going?" cries Sarah, with uncomfortable curiosity following her sister, who has already resumed her downward progress.

"I am going to the National Gallery to meet Mr. Forth."

"To the National Gallery? why cannot he come here?"

"Because, unfortunately, there is hardly so fine a collection of pictures here as there," replies Belinda disagreeably. "He wishes to show me a particular picture of the early Italian school."

A cold apprehension steals over Sarah.

"Do not go!" she cries impulsively, catching her sister's hands; "I am sure his picture is as little worth seeing as himself. Let him wait. Come back to the fire."

But Belinda resolutely draws her hands away and opens the street door.

"I am glad to be—for at all events a couple of hours—'out of the way,'" she says icily.

As Sarah, discomfited, climbs the stairs again, she winks away something very like a small tear from her jovial blue eye.

* * * * *

The light is dull. The short afternoon already shows signs of waning. In the

National Gallery, strolling about its handsome, all but empty rooms, is the usual sprinkling of odds and ends that represents the daily quota of art-lovers supplied by London from its four millions: two or three *mal-peigné* artisans; three or four ill-dressed women; a child or two. No better meeting-place could be found for any two people who wish to converse undisturbed, but have no reason to avoid their fellow-creatures' eyes. Under this head come the two persons who have so long been standing before a well-known Hobbema (the Giotto, which was the ostensible cause of their meeting, has been already inspected). A passer-by might presume that they were exhaustively criticizing each individual beauty, but in point of fact one does not see the picture at all, and the other thinks that she does not. In after days, however, she finds that she must have done, so plainly comes out, printed on her mind, the impress of that long, long straight road going away, away; of those great, tall, wayside poplars, with

their perspective of lengthy stems, their high, scant heads raised loftily into the pale sky—such slight, gray-green heads, each one with a different character about it; of the man walking along the road to the distant red-roofed Dutch village. It has seemed to Belinda as if that man must reach the village before the Professor has finished his slow speech; but he is not yet there, and the Professor has ended. For he has spoken, and not Greek. And now Belinda is speaking. Her eyes are fixed still with a sort of glassiness on the cool and tranquil canvas of the long-dead master; and the poplars seem almost to sway to her breath. Her voice is steady and quiet, though hard.

"I am very glad of what you say as to personal affection having no part in your motives for asking me to marry you. You do not want—love," she makes a hardly perceptible pause before pronouncing the word, "and I have none to give; so at all events we start fair."

He makes a sort of gesture of assent.

"I distrust, and have cause for distrusting, professions of affection," he answers drily.

A certain flavour of rancour in his tone tells his hearer that he is thinking of her sister, and a trivial passing wonder crosses her mind as to how far Sarah had carried her nefarious simulation of an unlikely passion. Never has it seemed so unlikely as at this moment.

"All that I ask, all that I wish to obtain, is an intelligent, sympathetic companion."

"*Sympathetic!*" she repeats reflectively. "I am not sympathetic; I should be deceiving you if I were to let you suppose that I am. No! let us be sure that we understand each other; I have as little sympathy to give as I have—love!"

Again that slight hesitation.

"Possibly!" he answers, with a stiff impatience, looking rather annoyed at her opposition; "on my side, I think it right to tell you of what you may perhaps be already aware, that the press of my occupations and the condition of my health forbid my

indulging in many amusements enjoyed by other persons, but from which I shall be compelled to require you, as well as myself, to abstain."

"I do not want amusements!" replies Belinda gloomily; "amusements do not amuse me. I want occupation; can you give me plenty of that?"

His face unbends with a slight smile.

"I think I can promise you that in the life you will share with me, you will find no lack of that. My mother——"

"Your mother!" repeats Belinda brusquely; "she is still alive then?"

"She is still spared to me," replies he piously; but a tone in his voice, striking upon her fine ear, tells her that he would not have quarrelled with the will of Heaven, had he not been so successful in keeping awhile "one parent from the skies."

"She must be very old," says Belinda thoughtfully, not reflecting on the unflattering inference to be drawn from this remark.

He assents: "She is somewhat advanced in years."

Belinda is silent for a moment or two. Her eyes are still vacantly fastened on the Hobbema; and a vague, absent wish to be walking with that man along that quiet road to that red village is playing about the surface of her preoccupied mind.

"Is she——" she begins, and then breaks off.

Across her memory have darted various facts communicated by Sarah about her future mother-in-law; facts of a not altogether satisfactory complexion; something about her being out of her mind, and never ceasing asking questions.

"Is she——" It is so difficult to word it civilly; "doting," "imbecile," "off her head"—she tries them all, but none sounds polite enough. "Is she" (she has it at last) "in full possession of her faculties?"

He hesitates a moment.

"She is somewhat deaf."

"Is her sight good?"

"I regret to say that it is almost gone."

"But she keeps her faculties? her mind?" pursues Belinda persistently.

"Her intellect is not what it was!" he answers, so shortly that Belinda feels that it is impossible to pursue her catechism further.

And, indeed, why should she? Has not the tone of his answers sufficiently proved to her that, for once in her life, Sarah had spoken unvarnished truth.

"My mother's bodily health is excellent," he continues presently; "I only wish that my own constitution were half as vigorous as hers; but her infirmities are such as to need a great deal of loving care: more," with a sigh, "than I am able to spare from my own avocations!"

Belinda is silent, drawing the obvious but not particularly welcome inference that the loving care is henceforth to be given by her.

"I am not naturally fond of old people," she says slowly. "I have been very little thrown with them; the only old person whom I know intimately, granny, is a great

deal younger in herself than I am. I will be as kind as I can to your mother; but that is not the sort of occupation I meant. I meant," turning her restless large look away from the restful picture to his face, at which she has hitherto hardly glanced—"I meant something that would fill the mind—some hard study!"

"There is nothing that I am aware of, to prevent your pursuing any line of study you may choose to select," he answers rather pettishly.

"And you think that the taste—the zest for it will certainly come—*certainly?*" pursues she eagerly. "Did you ever know a case of its failing? I must not deceive you; it has not come to me yet; I take no pleasure in learning; I think that I have as little real aptitude for study as" (Sarah, she is going to say, but stops in time)—"as the veriest dunce. But you think that I shall succeed if I persevere, do not you?" (plying him both with her feverish questions, and with the plaintive importunity of her eyes); "that perseverance must bring suc-

cess to anyone, however moderately bright. I know, of course"—humbly—"that I am not more than very moderately bright."

"You have a good average intelligence," he answers drily; "it would be flattery to imply that you have more!"

"Of course, of course!" she rejoins, meekly acquiescing in this lover-like expression of partiality; and then there is silence again.

It is broken by Professor Forth. It would not have been broken by Belinda. She is dreamily walking again along Hobbema's straight Dutch road. Would the village be at all like Wesenstein when you reached it?

"I suppose," he says ceremoniously, "that there will be no objection to my calling to-morrow morning in —— Street, to announce to your grandmother the step that we propose taking. I am, of course, not aware whether or no she will be likely to oppose it."

"Not she!" answers Belinda, leaping back from dreamland, and breaking into a

hard laugh; "she will be delighted to be rid of me."

"And—and your sister?" says he, with that same slight resentful difficulty which he always finds in mentioning Sarah; "will she, too, be delighted to be rid of you?"

"No—o, I think not!" answers Belinda slowly. "She would be perfectly justified if she were, for I have done my best of late to embitter her life; but no, I think not. By-the-bye," looking up and speaking with a quick animation that contrasts with her late sarcastic indifference, "I must stipulate that you will allow her to visit me. You do not bear malice to her," she adds naïvely, "for—for what happened formerly?"

"I am not likely to bear malice," he answers with an arid smile, "for a course of action for which I at least, as it turns out, have so much reason to be thankful."

"That is right," she answers carelessly, passing by his stiff *politesse;* "then I

think that is all. I think there is nothing more to say, is there?"

She speaks with the same unemotional business air as if she were concluding the purchase of a piece of land, or of some yards of cloth. The room is, at the moment, empty of anyone but themselves. It is near closing-time, and the sparse visitors are trailing off. There is nothing to hinder a lover-like parting embrace between the two persons who have just engaged to pass their lives together. But the possibility of this never once crosses Belinda's mind, not even when her newly-betrothed steps a pace nearer to her, and says, in a voice through which rather more of human emotion than she has ever before heard in it pierces:

"You must allow me to repeat the expression of my gratification—of my thanks!"

"What for?" she asks, piercing him with the direct look of her icy eyes. "It is a mere matter of business that we have been transacting. You want a secretary,

housekeeper, nurse for your mother; I want a home of my own, and a 'guide, philosopher, and friend,'" laughing harshly. "I see no room for thanks on either side!"

To such a speech, what rejoinder is there to make? He makes none.

"I may as well go home now," she says, in the same cool, matter-of-fact tone as before; "any further arrangements that there are to make may be made when you come to-morrow. You ask at what hour? At whatever hour best suits your convenience; early or late, it is indifferent to me which. I must ask you to call a hansom for me."

As they emerge from the building they find that rain is falling, a sleety rain to which the undecided snow has turned. It beats in her face as she walks down the steps; she does not take the trouble to run in order to escape it; she would as soon be wet as dry. It drives in upon her even in the hansom, where she has refused to allow the glass to be lowered.

One can get very fairly well soaked in a hansom if one goes the right way to work. And all along sleety Pall Mall, all the sleety way home, she is pestered with the sight, the smell, almost the *feel*, of the wood at Wesenstein!

* * * * *

"Granny," says Belinda, entering the drawing-room, walking straight up to Mrs. Churchill and standing before her, not allowing her attention to be distracted even by the wagging of three kind tails, distinctly addressed to her. "You and Sarah may begin to pack your boxes at once; you may be off to Monaco as soon as you please; I shall be 'out of the way'!"

Mrs. Churchill lifts her eyes, in which is none of their usual frisky light, and fixes them coldly on her tall young granddaughter, standing pale and severe before her. She has always thought Belinda too tall; it strikes her more forcibly than ever now, as she sees her towering majestically

above her. Belinda is too everything, except amusing.

"Are you hinting at Waterloo Bridge, 'by way of improving our spirits?" she asks sarcastically.

Mrs. Churchill is not in her playfullest mood, by which, almost as much as by her large lawn caps, she is known to an admiring public. The weather; the fact that several tiresome and not one pleasant person have been to call; the consciousness of guilt towards Belinda—a consciousness not quite stifled indeed, but diverted into the channel of anger by the smart, and in fact unmeasured rebukes she has had to submit to from Sarah—all, all combine to rob her of her usual suavity. Sarah's rebukes, indeed, would have led to a quarrel could she afford to quarrel with Sarah, but she cannot. Upon her hangs too much of the ease and diversion of her life. But there is no such motive to prevent her quarrelling with Belinda, and she feels that to do so would be a pleasant relief.

"Waterloo Bridge!" repeats Belinda, with a momentary want of comprehension; then, "Oh, I see! No; there are other modes of being out of the way beside death."

"Perhaps you mean to announce to us your approaching marriage," suggests the old lady ironically.

"You have saved me the trouble," answers the girl curtly, sitting down as she speaks and beginning to unfasten her cloak, whose warmth the hot and scented room begins to make oppressive.

"You are going to be married?" cries the old lady, jumping actively up, and running towards her; *ennui*, ill-humour, and sarcasm together racing away out of her voice, and making place both in it and in her sparkling eyes for a delightful excitement. "You do not say so! My dear child, you *have* taken us by surprise! I do not know when I have been so pleased!"

"Do not be in too great a hurry!" interrupts Belinda coldly. "Before you ex-

press any more pleasure, you had better hear who it is whom I have promised to marry."

"I was just going to ask, of course. Who is it? My dear child, I cannot tell you how *intriguée* I am to know," running swiftly over in her mind the list of Belinda's somewhat shadowy admirers, all of them kept so rigorously at bay that it would have seemed impossible that any one of them could have approached within sight of love-making.

"It is Professor Forth!"

Mrs. Churchill's jaws drop; the dimpling smiles—she still has the remnants of an old dimple or two—vanish from her cheek. For several moments she is totally incapable of speech; and even at the end of them is only able to gasp out the incoherent words:

"Professor Forth! What are you talking about? Nonsense! Impossible!"

"If you disbelieve me," says Belinda quietly, "you had better ask him. He is

coming to-morrow to inquire whether you can spare me. I told him that I thought you could."

"Professor Forth!" repeats Mrs. Churchill, gradually but slowly regaining the possession of her senses. "I cannot think what has happened to the girls; first Sarah, and then you. You must be bewitched!"

"I do not think that he has used any magic," rejoins Belinda, still with that pallid composure of hers. "The matter lies in a nut-shell: he wants a wife, and I want a——" "Husband" she is going to say, but something in the employ of the word in such a connection strikes her as shocking and impossible. She leaves her sentence for ever unfinished.

"Well, '*tous les goûts sont respectables*,' I suppose," rejoins Mrs. Churchill with a cynical shrug.

"To what are you applying that lying pet maxim of yours, my old friend?" asks Sarah playfully, coming suddenly into the

room, rubbing her little cold hands and approaching her grandmother with a conciliatory air.

She feels a vague relief in seeing that Belinda is at home again. Neither answers; Belinda, because she has no wish to rob her grandmother of the pleasure of communicating her piece of intelligence; Mrs. Churchill, because a remnant of hurt dignity ties the tongue which she is longing to unloose.

"To what or whom are you applying it?" repeats Sarah more sharply, glancing suspiciously from one to the other as she speaks.

"To Belinda," replies the elder woman, unable any longer to refrain herself. "I do not know how you will like being supplanted, but she has just been informing me, as you once before did, that Professor Forth is to be my grandson."

"He is not!" cries Sarah loudly and angrily, turning scarlet. "Belinda," taking her sister by the shoulder and rudely

shaking her, "why do not you speak? why do not you contradict her? why do you allow her to say such things about you? It is not true! Say that it is not true; it is only a *canard.* You have been saying it only to tease her; say that it is not true!"

"Why should not it be true?" asks Belinda, turning her lovely cold face and her gloomy eyes up towards Sarah.

The latter's hand drops nerveless from her sister's shoulder, and she steps back a pace or two.

"Then it *is* true!" she says, horrified.

"One would hardly imagine from your manner that you yourself had once been engaged to him," returns Belinda drily; "and yet I believe that it was so."

"More shame for me," cries the other violently; "but I will do myself the justice to say that I never had the most distant intention of marrying him."

"There we differ then," says Belinda,

slowly rising, and walking with her cloak over her arm to the door, "for I have every intention of marrying him; and so, granny," turning as she reaches it and calmly facing them both, "as I began by saying, you may pack your trunks for Monaco as soon as you please."

"How tiresomely she harps upon that string!" cries Mrs. Churchill peevishly; the more peevishly for the pricks that her conscience, albeit a tough one, is giving her.

"It is all your doing," says Sarah morosely, viciously rattling the fire-irons and boxing the dogs' ears; "you have driven her to it; sooner or later I knew that you would!"

"Pooh!" replies the other crossly; "she is not so easily driven or led either. If it were for her happiness," with a little pious parental air, "I cannot say that I should much regret her marriage; and if it does really come off—it is a shocking thing, of course, such an *amant pour rire*, but she

seems bent upon it; and if it does really come off," the natural frisky light re-illuming her eyes, "why then, my dear child, there is in point of fact nothing to keep us from the South!"

CHAPTER V.

THE morrow has come. Mrs. Churchill has risen refreshed and healthful from pleasing dreams of sunshine and lansquenet. Sarah has tossed between vexed visions and unwonted wakefulness. And Belinda? Belinda makes no complaint of her night. She looks older than when she went to bed, but the cold is pinching, and for the last year and a half she has been perceptibly ageing. The morrow has come, and the Professor. To-day he is not ushered into the little dark back-room, but is led by a full-buttoned pompous Tommy into the drawing-room, where his grandmother-elect sits ready and alone to receive him.

Perhaps they have not a great deal to say to each other. At all events the interval is short before the bell is rung and a message given to request Miss Churchill to come down. She is sitting in her little chilly bedroom, her cheek pressed against the window-pane and her eyes idly following the dirty sparrows on the leads.

Without a moment's lingering, she obeys. As she enters the room her betrothed advances to meet her.

"I am happy to be able to inform you," he says in his stiff Donnish voice, "that your grandmother is good enough to say that she has no obstacle to oppose to our union."

"I told you that she would not," replies Belinda calmly; "I knew that she could spare me."

The words are simple and simply spoken, with no special stress or significant accent laid upon them; and yet under them the old lady winces.

"It is no case of 'sparing,'" she says sharply; "of course it is a break-up to our

little circle; but I have no right to allow personal feeling to influence me. You are old enough to decide for yourself; you are of age; you came of age six months ago. In a case of this kind a third person has no business to interfere; and of course if you are sincerely fond of each other——"

Belinda shivers.

"Fond! it is no question of *fondness!*" she says, breathing quick and short, and in a concentrated low voice; "you entirely misapprehend. I thought that Mr. Forth had explained to you; it is a *mariage de raison;* we marry one another because we can be useful to each other. Is it not so?" appealing to him with abrupt and uncompromising directness.

"Mrs. Churchill must be as well aware as yourself," he replies pettishly, "that I have no reason to wish for exaggerated professions of affection."

"Well, I will leave you to settle it between yourselves," cries Mrs. Churchill rather hastily, gathering up her work and making for the door; eluding, as she has

made a golden rule of doing through life, any scene that threatened to be disagreeable. "You will stay to luncheon, of course, Mr. Forth?"

Nodding and smiling, she withdraws; and the dogs, with their usual fine tact, follow her—all but Jane. As soon as she is gone:

"I hope," says Belinda, fixing her joyless, unbashful eyes full upon him—eyes with enough coldness in them to freeze a volcano—"that there is no misapprehension, that you understand our relative positions as I do."

"I believe that there is no necessity to go over the same ground again!" he answers snappishly.

His snappishness does not infect her.

"It is better to go over it now while it is yet time, than afterwards, when it would be too late," she answers earnestly.

He has drawn near his usual magnet, the fire, and is chafing his bloodless hands over it. Perhaps this is the reason why he expresses neither assent nor dissent.

"I want to make it quite clear to you," she says, still in that same deeply earnest voice, "so that you may not have cause to reproach me afterwards, or think that I have dealt unjustly with you: I have not one grain of love to give you, nor ever shall have!" letting fall each slow word with a weight of heavy emphasis. "Many men—most men—would refuse a woman upon such terms. It is open to you still to refuse me."

The person she is addressing moves uneasily in his chair.

"I imagined," he says fretfully, "that we had treated this subject exhaustively yesterday."

"We cannot treat it too exhaustively," she answers persistently. "Though I cannot love you—happily for you, you have no wish that I should—I will do my best by you; I will be as useful to you as I can. From what I gather of your circumstances I imagine that I can be very useful to you. You are not young; you have not good health; you are lonely."

A certain sound of fidgeting from the chair so chillily drawn close to the hearth betrays that there is something in this catalogue of his infirmities not altogether agreeable to its occupant.

"I am lonely too, in my way," continues Belinda, with an unconscious accent of self-pity; "we can help each other; you will teach me," appealing to him with that hopeless, cold gentleness of hers. "I shall be a dull scholar, and never do you credit; but you will teach me; we will do our best by each other."

As she finishes speaking she draws nearer to him, and holds out her young soft hand, as if to seal with it this frosty bargain. He takes it formally, but does not press it any more than he had pressed her grandmother's. Perhaps he has no inclination. Perhaps he dares not.

Belinda sits down opposite to him; the light from the window, such as it is, falling full on her face; her hands folded in her lap, and her eyes looking straight before

her. There is something so odd and strained in her attitude that Jane, well-meaning but injudicious, goes up to her and rubs her long nose and her pink-rimmed eyes against her knees to cheer her.

"Had your grandmother been able to spare me a few more minutes," says Mr. Forth, in a key in which a slight tinge of umbrage is perceptible, "I could have wished to enter with her into some details, upon which, as things now are, I have been unable to touch. With regard to the date, for instance, I should be unwilling to hurry you unduly, but——"

During the whole of his last sentence she has felt him watching her narrowly. Is this the touchstone that he is applying to her sincerity? Does he expect her to turn as dishonestly restive as Sarah had obviously done whenever any suggestion of a like nature had been made to her? The idea crosses her mind with a sort of thin fugitive amusement.

"You need not consult granny," she

answers coldly; "you had better arrange it so as best to suit your own convenience."

There is such an evident good faith, such an entire absence of all desire of evasion in her look and tone, that his scrutiny relaxes.

"It is all one to me," she says; "there is nothing to wait for."

In her tone is such a flat, tame hopelessness that Jane redoubles her rubbing against her knees, and accompanies it with an acute, short bark. If that will not put her in spirits, nothing will.

"I should, of course," pursues Mr. Forth, "be anxious to leave you sufficient time for such preparations as you may wish to make."

"What preparations?" she asks brusquely; "I need none. You are past the age, I suppose, when marriage festivities would give you much pleasure; and they would be entirely out of place here."

"It is, however, usual, I believe," he answers, in an annoyed tone, "to make

some slight sacrifices to conventionality on an occasion of this kind; it is usual——"

"It is usual to love one another!" breaks in she with a bitter laugh. "What is usual with others does not apply to us; you need not take my preparations into your calculations."

He is silent, but his face expresses vexation.

"It had better be soon," continues Belinda coolly; "I shall be in the way here if it is not. They want to be rid of me; they want to go to the south of France; it had better be soon."

But even now Professor Forth does not immediately answer. Perhaps this mode of treating the question of an approaching marriage seems to him even more baffling than Sarah's. At last:

"It is extremely fortunate for me," he says slowly, and without any perceptible exhilaration of tone, "to find you so ready to meet my views."

"There is nothing to wait for," repeats she flatly. It seems as if in this

phrase there were a dismal charm for her.

Again there is a pause, during which Belinda's eyes rest upon her betrothed's face with a look of cold expectancy.

"Were I not reassured," he begins at length, "by the indifference you express as to the date, I should hesitate to name one so early as the 10th of next month."

"Could not it be sooner?" asks Belinda curtly.

He looks at her in unfeigned astonishment. In this family is he to experience no medium between disingenuous procrastination and unmaidenly haste?

Belinda sees and interprets his look, but her eyes do not fall; her cheeks do not colour beneath it.

"When a thing has to be done," she says, with a sort of restlessness for a moment ruffling her hitherto deathly calm, "it is well that it should be done at once; I hate dawdling!"

"I fear," he says, in a perplexed and not particularly pleased voice, "that my

engagements will not allow of my suggesting an earlier date. I had thought that the 10th would have left a clear fortnight, before the commencement of term, for whatever journey——"

"*Journey!*" she interrupts almost rudely, breathing quick. "What journey? do you mean a wedding tour?" with an accent of indescribable shrinking. "Why should we make one at all? why should not we go straight to Oxbridge?"

"I am sorry," he answers stiffly, "to disoblige you; but, quite independently of present arrangements, I have been advised by my medical man to try the effect of a more bracing air, as a corrective to the extreme relaxingness of Oxbridge!"

She is silent for a moment; then:

"Of course," she says grudgingly, "if it is a matter of health, I can say nothing; but, as far as I am concerned, I would far rather go straight to Oxbridge."

* * * * *

"He is not going to stay to luncheon

then ?" cries Sarah, in an exhilarated voice, running into the drawing-room; after having been hanging perilously far over the upper banisters unseen, to speed the parting guest. "Thank God for that! There are sweetbreads for luncheon, and I should have been sorry to miss them, as I certainly should, for nothing would have induced me to sit down with him!"

"I think you will have to get over that little difficulty in time!" replies Belinda drily.

She had risen to bid her betrothed good-bye, and yet stands. She is holding her cold right hand, which still seems to feel the chill impress of his frosty handshake, to the fire.

"He is gone for good, is not he?" continues Sarah, hurrying up; "you have thought better of it? it was only a joke? As a joke, it was not a bad one; I am not sure," with a glance of indignant admiration at her sister, "that in that point of view it was not an improvement even upon mine in the same line; but one may have too much

of it. It *was* a joke, was not it?" with an eager stress.

"On the contrary," replies Belinda, with as icy a composure as if her lover's bloodless eld were infectious, and she had caught it; "the day is fixed!"

In her hasty entrance Sarah had left the door ajar, and through it her grandmother now enters; having apparently overheard the last words.

"The day fixed!" repeats she, with her eyes dancing; "my dear Belinda, you take us by storm! we are in a whirl! But fixed for when?"

"For the 10th of next month," replies Belinda curtly, turning away her dull face from her beaming questioner, and speaking in a key, if possible, yet more frozen than before.

"The 10th!" repeats Mrs. Churchill, in a tone into which she honestly, if not very successfully, tries to infuse a tinge of regret; "that *is* soon! You *are* in a hurry to leave us!"

"There is nothing to wait for," replies

Belinda, mechanically repeating her dreary formula.

"I cannot think how we shall manage about your clothes!" continues Mrs. Churchill, growing pink with pleasure, and her old dimple reappearing. "We shall be shockingly hurried! we must go about your underclothes and *lingerie* this afternoon. Mary Smith in Sloane Street is excellent, is not she, Sarah? but she has already half a dozen wedding orders."

"She may be spared a seventh," replies Belinda, with a bitter small smile. "I will have no new clothes!"

"That means, of course, that you are not in earnest," says Mrs. Churchill, with a disappointed refrigeration of tone; "that the whole thing is a fiction. You might as well have said so at first!"

A flash of hope has come into Sarah's sunny eyes as she looks eagerly at her sister; but at the expression of that sister's face it at once dies down again.

"Do not be afraid," says Belinda quietly, "it is no fiction; but I will have no new

clothes: you will have the more money to spend at Monaco."

"Monaco! Monaco!" repeats Mrs. Churchill, hiding a look of conscious guilt under a fretful air; "you have Monaco on the brain; it is your *idée fixe!* But as to your clothes——"

"As to my clothes—simply I will not have any," replies Belinda, with a look of imperative decision.

"I should have thought them the one Goshen in your desert," says Sarah, with an annoyed laugh; "them and the presents."

"Presents!" echoes Belinda impatiently; "I will have no presents!"

"In short," says Mrs. Churchill sarcastically, "you and the Professor will crawl in a four-wheeled cab to a registry-office at eight o'clock in the morning."

"If you substitute a church for a registry-office, you have exactly expressed my intention."

There is an aghast silence. Sarah and Mrs. Churchill look at one another.

Something in their interchange of glances grates upon Belinda.

"You will never understand," she says, exchanging her icy calm voice for one of excessive irritability, such irritability as of late her family has been too well acquainted with, "and it is no use explaining to you. I am tired of explaining to you that this is not an ordinary marriage. What is there to make a gala of, and buy new clothes for, in a mere matter of business? I tell you it is a mere matter of business; I keep dinning it into your ears, but you *will not* understand! it is a *mere matter of business!*"

She repeats it over and over again, as if to reassure herself by the strength and number of her own repetitions, and looks round at her two auditors, as if daring them to oppose any contradiction to her assertion. Neither of them does. It is, indeed, some moments before either of them finds anything to say. Then—

"Have you made this quite clear to Professor Forth?" asks Mrs. Churchill drily.

"Quite!" replies Belinda excitedly; "quite! I made it as clear as the sun in heaven; he quite understands; he fully agrees with me; he is quite of my way of thinking."

"He must be a very odd bridegroom," says Mrs. Churchill sarcastically.

"It is a marriage of the mind!" replies Belinda, still more excitedly, looking round with angry suspicion in search of the ridicule which she dimly feels may attach to her last utterance. "I do not suppose that there is anything very odd in two people hoping to draw a certain amount of rational happiness from such."

Mrs. Churchill turns away to conceal an ungovernable smile.

"A marriage of the mind!" repeats Sarah, with a disgusted accent; "well, I have heard of them before, but this is the first time that I ever had the pleasure of meeting one; and I humbly hope it may be the last."

CHAPTER VI.

THE winter advances; Christmas comes; comes, as it not infrequently now comes to the world's greatest city, in an almost total darkness; a choking yellow darkness. The gas has to be lit at ten o'clock in the morning. Drearily it flares, from the imperceptible dawn until the undiscriminated night. Under its and the fog's pestilent breaths the flowers in the stands wither; the carefully-cherished puny ferns shrink away into death. Through the suffocating obscurity the church bells ring muffled; the cabs crawl cautiously at a foot's pace, and the omnibuses cease to run. None of the Churchill family have been able to get

to church; and either by that fact or by the fog their spirits and tempers are sensibly worsened.

Mrs. Churchill likes to go to church on Christmas Day; it is a sort of fetish, the loss of which may entail disadvantage upon her, either in this world or in the next.

"How anything short of absolute necessity can keep anyone in England during the winter months, passes my comprehension!" cries she, taking up her old cry, and pettishly clicking together the clasps of the prayer-book, in which she has been reading the lessons for the day.

Sarah, her only companion, makes no reply; not that she is absorbed in any occupation, but because the remark appears to her to be both old and worthless.

"And I am far from feeling sure that we shall ever get away after all," continues the elder woman, seeing that she may wait in vain for a sympathetic response. "I feel no sort of confidence in Belinda," in an exasperated voice; "she is quite capable of throwing him over at the last moment.

What do you think? do not you hear that I am speaking to you? do not you think that she is quite capable of throwing him over at the last moment?"

"It shall not be for want of asking if she does not," replies Sarah surlily.

"I really do not see that you have any right to put pressure upon her," rejoins Mrs. Churchill crossly; "I cannot see that it is any business of yours. Because *you* behaved extremely ill to him, is no reason why you should incite your sister to do the same. In fairness to him, I must insist upon your not attempting to influence her one way or the other!"

"You *may* insist," replies Sarah unduti-fully, her soft round face growing dogged and hard; "but as long as I have one breath left, I shall spend it in trying to hinder her from such a monstrous suicide."

"*Suicide!*" repeats Mrs. Churchill angrily; "pooh! you may be very thankful if you ever get anyone to make as good a settlement upon you as he has done upon her! *Suicide*, indeed!"

"Why do you not marry him yourself, if you are so pleased with him?" asks Sarah cynically; "it seems all one to him which of us he marries, so as he gets one of the family; it seems to be the breed, not the individual, that he admires. Marry him yourself, and carry him off to Cannes; I assure you that I will not move a finger to prevent you!"

"He is a man not without distinction in his own line," pursues Mrs. Churchill, affecting not to have heard her granddaughter's last ironical suggestion; "though it happens to be a line which you are quite incapable of appreciating. He is not handsome, certainly, but there is a good deal of —of," hesitating for an encomium—"of character in his face. He has made an excellent settlement upon her; it quite took me by surprise. She is twenty-one, and it is her first *bonâ-fide* offer; I think you will not be acting at all a friend's part in making her quarrel with her bread-and-butter."

"Whether I am acting the part of a

friend or not," retorts Sarah obstinately, marching towards the door, "I promise you that I shall carry my remonstrances to the altar-foot; and so would you if you did your duty. You may like to know," firing a defiant parting shot from the doorway, "that I am going straight to her now to resume the subject."

She is as good as her word. She finds Belinda where she knew that she would find her, in her little back sitting-room, but not employed as she had expected. She had thought to come upon her stooping over her eternal copy-books; but for once they are laid aside. She is sitting on the hearthrug, the gas glaring above her and casting its ugly shadows upon her cheeks, making them look lined and hollow. Strewn about her is a small litter of old writing-desks, old workboxes, childish relics. On her lap lies open a morocco pocket-book, over which, on Sarah's entrance, she hastily puts her hands, as if to conceal it.

"I am setting my house in order," she

says, looking up with a rather guilty smile. "Did you ever see such a squirrel's nest? Here is the case of court-plaister that you gave me on my eighth birthday. Do you remember how fond we were of giving each other court-plaister? Here is the lady's companion that granny brought me from Bath; I remember crying because she brought you such a much better one. Even as long ago as then," looking pensively at the little rusty old pair of scissors and the dim bodkin, "it began."

"What were you looking at when I came in?" asks Sarah brusquely, and dropping on her knees beside her sister.

Belinda starts. Her first impulse is to clasp her hands in still closer guardianship over her hid treasure; but her next corrects it.

"You are quite welcome to see them once more, before they go into the fire," she says quietly, though in the yellow gaslight her cheeks crimson. "I do not know why I should hide them; they are relics of an affection almost as warm and

as steady as granny's. There!" picking up and holding scornfully between her finger and thumb for Sarah's inspection one withered flower after another. "That was once a gardenia; that was a Cape jessamine; that was a tuberose. How pretty they look! how sweetly they smell now! Have you looked enough at them? Off with them then!"

As she speaks, and despite Sarah's hand stretched out with involuntary eagerness to check her, she tosses the little dry skeletons into the fire, where, with a hardly perceptible shrivel and crackle, they for ever disappear.

Belinda watches them with a hard, dry eye.

"Are you satisfied?" she says, turning to her sister, and exhibiting the pocket-book extended empty from cover to cover. "There is nothing else in it except my love-letter; it is humiliating to have but one, is not it? Would you like to read it again before it follows those pretty flowers, or may it go at once?"

"Give it me!" cries Sarah, snatching the little sheet, which looks older than it really is from obvious hard wear, continual unfolding, blistering tears. "I will read it again. Perhaps, reading it in cold blood like this, the meaning may strike one differently!"

"If you wish I can spare you the trouble," says Belinda bitterly. "I can say it to you if you wish."

The fire burns low and dull; and Sarah rises and stands right beneath the gas, so that no lack of light may hinder her examination of the document in her hand. But the rays of a June sun would be in this case of no use.

"I can make nothing of it," she says dispiritedly, giving it back to its owner; "but do not—*do not* burn it!"

For a moment Belinda hesitates, considering with quivering eyelids and trembling lip the small and faded paper. Then in a moment it has followed the flowers.

At first it gives a curling writhe, as if it

hurt it to be burnt; then one or two sentences come out very clear before flying in black film up the chimney. The one that lasts longest and disappears latest is, "Oh, forgive me!"

After that there is silence. Sarah has dropped sulkily into an armchair; and Belinda has turned again to her childish treasures, and is beginning to sort and part them. But her hands move mechanically of their own accord, and with that want of purpose which shows that they are not directed by the brain.

When a quarter of an hour has gone dumbly by, Belinda speaks, in that flat and spiritless voice which is now habitual to her:

"I wanted to ask your advice; I want you to give me your opinion. Is it necessary—am I bound in honour to tell Professor Forth?"

She stops with a sudden sobbing catch in her breath.

"If you think that your confidence will be in the least likely to make him break

his engagement, tell him by all means!" replies Sarah surlily. "Not only tell him what there is to tell, but invent a great deal more besides. I promise you that I will aid you with all the powers of my imagination!"

"Must I really tell him?" groans Belinda, with an accent of such acute pain that Sarah's heart smites her.

"Tell him!" she cries compassionately. "My poor child, what is there to tell?"

"What indeed!" acquiesces Belinda, in bitter humility. But she looks relieved. "Even if there were anything to tell," she goes on a moment later—"but, as you justly say, there is nothing, for one is not answerable to anyone for the freaks of one's own imagination—but even if there were, he has no concern with my past, has he? It is only from the tenth of next month onwards that I am accountable to him for my actions!"

"The tenth of next month!" repeats Sarah fiercely. "What, is that still the

day on which the gallows is to be erected?"

"If you think that by wording it so offensively, you will induce me to put it off, you are mistaken," answers Belinda, with an access of miserable, sore ill-humour; "and you know the sooner I am 'out of the way'—I am always in the way now—the sooner you can be off to the South!"

"Save your sneers for granny, who deserves them," answers Sarah, genuinely hurt. "I do not."

"I know you do not!" cries the other remorsefully; "but you were the nearest thing to me. It seems, nowadays, as if I must put my sting into whatever is nearest to me!"

"That is the right frame of mind in which to be led to the gal—— to the altar, is not it?" retorts Sarah sarcastically; and again they are silent.

"I now wish to heaven," resumes Sarah devoutly, at the expiration of a heavy interval, "that I had married him myself. Intensely as I should have disliked it, he

could not have made me as unhappy as he will you. A wineglass holds less than a hogshead; and the pious hope of an early widowhood, which you will be too conscientious to indulge, would have buoyed me up!"

Belinda's only answer is a sickly smile.

"You would have gone on living with granny and the dogs," pursues Sarah, in earnest narrative; "she would have grown civiller to you when she found that she had no one else to depend on, and she really is very good company when she chooses; and by-and-by, some fine day, Rivers might have come back. No, no!" resolutely catching and holding down with her small, strong wrists the hands that her sister is hurrying to her tortured face. "I do not care whether you wince or no! I do not care whether it hurts you or no; you *must* and *shall* hear. *Some day—Rivers—might—have come back again!* He may come back still; but it may be after the 10th of January!"

She pauses dramatically, and fixes her

eyes upon the poor quivering features, so barely exposed to her piercing scrutiny. There comes no answer but a moaning sigh.

"I can give you no reason for it," continues Sarah; "I know no more about him than you do; but I have a conviction—something tells me, that there has been some mistake, some hitch, some unavoidable delay!"

"An unavoidable delay of eighteen months!" says Belinda, with faltering irony. "How likely!"

"A letter has been lost."

"Letters are never lost," hopelessly.

"Well, have it as you like!" cries Sarah impatiently. "All the same, my conviction remains that some day he will come back again. How glad you will be to see him! How pleasant it will be for you to introduce him to your husband, Mr. Forth!"

By a great wrench, Belinda succeeds in loosing one hand; but it is a very insufficient shield, and she has failed in liberating

the other, so sturdily held in Sarah's small but potent grasp.

"I see him coming into the room with those blazing eyes of his," goes on Sarah, in a sort of prophetic frenzy—"they were not much like Mr. Forth's eyes, were they?—and you introducing them to each other: 'My husband, Mr. Forth! Mr. Rivers!' I envy you that moment!"

But at this Belinda tears herself free.

"This is too much!" she says, in a suffocated voice, and struggling to reach the door. "Let me go! I *must* go! I can bear no more!"

But Sarah falls on her knees, and catches her sister's gown.

"Do you think it is as bad as the reality will be?" she asks, in a thrilling, clear voice. "And you will not be able to run away from it! Do you suppose that there will be a single corner in the whole earth in which you can take refuge from it?"

Something in Sarah's tone has, more than her detaining gesture, arrested Be-

linda's flight. Stock-still she stands, in a wretched irresolution, death-pale.

"It is too late!" she murmurs miserably.

"It is *not* too late!" cries Sarah in wild excitement, clasping her sister's knees; "it will be too late after the 10th, but it is not too late now. Give it up! Throw him over! What will he care? What harm will it do him? How much the worse is he for having been thrown over by me?"

Belinda still stands, white and trembling, her eyes staring stonily out into vacancy. Before them, though they seem to see nothing, stands that dreadful vision conjured up by her sister; and the sight of it makes every limb shake.

"It is impossible!" she says feebly.

"It is *not* impossible!" asseverates Sarah, in passionate heat. "Give me a chance, and I will show you whether it is possible or no! Let me tell him. Give me that commission as my Christmas-box; it would be the best I ever had! I will tell him," laughing rather hysterically, "that

it is a constitutional peculiarity of our family!"

Perhaps it is Sarah's laugh that recalls her sister to a more normal condition of feeling. With a long sigh she comes back to reality.

"Who would tell granny?" she asks, with a sarcastic smile. "Who would dare break to her that she was not to be robbed of her darling after all?"

"*I* would!" cries Sarah, with delighted eagerness. "I know few things in the world that would give me a purer pleasure. Let me go now, at once! Strike while the iron is hot!" jumping up, and moving in *her* turn rapidly towards the door. But it is now Belinda who detains *her*.

"Pooh!" she says coldly; "it was only a flight of fancy on my part. It would be amusing to give her a fright; but she has no real cause for alarm. What change has happened that I should change?" in a lifeless tone. "Your word-painting was so vivid, that for one moment I thought he had come back; but it seems not. I think,"

with a bitter smile, "that if I waited for him to come back to me, I should wait my life long."

"I do not ask you to wait your life long," cries Sarah, redoubling that energy of persuasion which, as she disappointedly sees, has been hitherto exercised in vain. "I only ask you to wait *one month!* Surely," with a scathing sneer, "the joys that you expect are not so poignant but that you can afford to defer them for four weeks!"

"Why should I defer them?" asks Belinda, with a fierce restlessness in eye and gesture. "If I had had my will, I should have been married by now. It is this state of transition which is worst of all; one is unhinged; one is off one's balance."

Sarah has again fallen down on the floor before her sister, and is again suppliantly clasping her knees.

"One month! one month!" she cries beseechingly. "And before the month is out, you may be down on your knees as

I am, thanking God and me for having saved you from perdition. One month! one month!"

She has pressed her head against her sister's gown, and through the woollen stuff her tears are soaking—Sarah's rare tears!

There is such a compelling ring in her voice that Belinda's cold, sick heart throbs beneath it. Again that vision rises before her, but changed and beautified. Rivers is coming into the room, but between him and her thrusts itself no chill, pedant figure.

As she so stands hesitating, thrilling, in a waking dream, the door of the room does in effect fly open, and some one enters. Is it Rivers? Alas, no!

"A merry Christmas to you!" bawls Miss Watson, noisily entering, and throwing her greeting at them like a paving-stone. "I have just been up to wish granny a merry Christmas, but she does not seem very bright, eh? Do you think she is breaking at all? She did not seem up to her usual mark!"

Sarah has sprung to her feet, her habitual *aplomb* gone, and her one impulse to hide, at any price, her tear-stained face from the horny eyes of the intruder.

"Why, *you* do not look very bright either!" cries the latter, looking inquisitively from one to the other of the girls' dismal faces. "What is it? Christmas bills? Colds? You look as if you had a cold!" concentrating her whole attention upon Sarah, whose face is so little used to being inundated with tears that it resents it, and shows the traces more plainly than does one that is frequently bewept.

"I have," she answers, snatching eagerly at the excuse, and violently resuming a part of her usual nonchalant self-command; "a terrific cold. I have had it for—for *years!* If I were you, I would not come near me, or I shall give it you as soon as look at you!"

"Pooh!" replies Miss Watson doughtily. "You should take a cold bath all the year round, and wear flannel next your skin. Look at me!"

"Are you the result of taking a cold bath all the year round, and wearing flannel next the skin?" asks Sarah innocently, stealing a covert glance at her own foggy image in the little Chippendale mirror over the mantelpiece, to see how far she is recovered.

But Miss Watson does not hear.

"I am sure I do not know how I ever got here!" continues she, drawing up a chair to the fire, and setting her large feet on the fender; "there is not a cab to be had. I felt my way all round Berkeley Square by the railings. Five or six times I was as nearly as possible run over!"

"Just heavens, why not *quite?*" murmurs Sarah under her breath.

"I never remember such a Christmas Day; do *you* ever remember such a Christmas Day? I have just been asking granny whether, in all her long experience, *she* ever remembers such a Christmas Day."

"If you have been appealing to granny's long experience," rejoins Sarah sarcas-

tically, "no wonder you did not find her very bright; there is nothing in the world that she hates so much."

"I told her how ill I thought her looking," goes on the visitor comfortably, rubbing her knees, advanced in close proximity to the fire. "She tells me that it is the climate; that it is killing her by inches. She seems to have her heart set upon going to the Riviera; why does not she go?" with another look of acute inquisitiveness darted at her two companions. "She spoke of there being some tiresome hitch—something in the way; what is it—eh?"

"We cannot bear to go so far away from you," replies Sarah impudently, but with a nervous laugh and look towards her sister; "that is it."

But a curiosity so robust as Miss Watson's is not to be blunted by a jest. That great Toledo blade is not to be turned aside by a light rapier.

"No question of £ *s. d.*, eh?" says she persistently; "the Riviera grows dearer

every year! No? Anything about either of you, then?" trying to get a better idea of Belinda than the rather drooped nape of her white neck and one homespun shoulder afford; "any little—little *entanglement*, eh?"

"You have hit it!" cries Sarah jeeringly; "it is useless to try and conceal anything from you: we are endeavouring to arrange a marriage between me and the Archbishop of Canterbury; and as he cannot conveniently leave his see, we think it as well that I should remain in the neighbourhood."

It is obvious that nothing is to be made of Sarah; the visitor turns her attention towards the other sister.

"Any more Latin exercises, Belinda?" she asks in a rallying voice; "has Professor Forth been helping you to do any more Latin exercises? does he often come? do you see much of him? does he ever ask you to go down to Oxbridge, eh?"

To these questions Belinda's answer is

so unready that her junior has again to come to her aid.

"Of course," she answers ironically; "but he says he will not have us, unless we bring you too."

"As to that," replies Miss Watson, her rhinoceros-hide quite unpunctured by the pricks of this angry persiflage, "I can tell you I have a very good mind to take a run down there. What do you say to our making up a party? we would make him give us luncheon and take us about; they are always delighted to give one luncheon and take one about; and if we can get hold of Rivers, we will make him come too."

She looks triumphantly round to collect the suffrages of her companions as to this project; but neither is equal to giving utterance to any opinion upon it.

"Apropos of Rivers," continues the other, too happy in the sound of her own voice to miss the lacking response, and addressing the observation more especially to Belinda, "a very odd thing happened to me. I had not gone five yards from your

house the other day, before I met him. I asked him at once whether he was on his way to call upon you."

"And he said what?" asks Sarah, trying to speak lightly, but with a hurry in her voice that she cannot still.

"He said 'No.'"

"That answer had at least the merit of brevity," replies Sarah, laughing forcedly and changing her position so as to interpose the slight bulwark of her girlish figure between her sister and their guest.

"I asked him why not. I said, 'Do go; they expect you.'"

"That did not show a rigorous attention to truth on your part," rejoins Sarah sharply: "we did not expect him. But what did he say to that? was his answer marked by the same courteous diffuseness as before?"

"He did not say anything; he walked on very fast and hailed a hansom; but I should not wonder if he did come after all," consolingly. "I called out to him, just as he was driving off, to be sure not to forget.

Is that the luncheon-bell? Dear me! how the morning has run away! I suppose," with her loud assured laugh, "that you will give me a slice of beef and plum pudding, will not you, eh?"

CHAPTER VII.

AFTER that Christmas morning Sarah spends her eloquence in vain. She may draw what pictures and practise what oratory and cry what tears she chooses. Of what use is it to draw pictures for, or address appeals to, or weep tears over a stone? And as far as any malleability or power of receiving impressions from without goes, Belinda is henceforth a stone. She accepts all her sister's appeals in a sullen, dogged silence. Whether she ever even hears them, Sarah is ignorant. She gives no sign of having done so by any least emotion produced by them. She listens, or seems to listen, with phlegmatic indifference to the sarcasms,

vituperations, witticisms, poured from Sarah's cornucopia upon her future husband. They awake in her neither anger nor pain. She makes no effort to check them. Apparently she would as soon hear them as not. But at the end of them, when Sarah, from pure loss of breath—not, heaven knows, from any lack of goodwill—has paused, things are at precisely the same point as they were when she began.

Beaten and discouraged, she desists at last. Not, indeed, that she ever constrains herself so far as to omit tacking on some abusive adjective to the name of her future brother-in-law whenever she has occasion to mention him. Nor is it until she has exhausted every possible expletive that, as far as she knows, the English language contains, and applied them not only to him, but to his mother, that she desists at all. She relieves her feelings by putting all the dogs into mourning, tying a piece of black crape round each of their tails; a proceeding which fills Punch with fury, Slutty

with *mauvaise honte*, and Jane with pride. Jane has that love for finery which is implanted in many plain persons.

With a face set like a flint, Belinda marches to her doom. And neither dogs nor men can retard the approach of the date of that doom. There are no preparations to delay it. She has steadfastly adhered to her determination to have no new clothes.

"A wilful woman will have her way!" Mrs. Churchill says, shaking that head whose eyes seem to grow brighter and her cheeks pinker and smoother as each day brings her nearer to the 10th of January and the South of France. "I suppose you know your own affairs best; and I fancy that you will not have much need for dress at Oxbridge. The only time that I was there I thought all the women shockingly *fagoté*!"

She stops and shrugs her shoulders at the recollection; but even as she shrugs a smile hovers across her lips. She is thinking that her French tour will be none the

worse for having her purse made heavier by the weight of Belinda's trousseau.

"I am *too* annoyed about Belinda," she says on another occasion to her younger granddaughter; "but you know how useless argument is! She is as obstinate as a mule; and since she is determined to be no expense to me, I was thinking," her eye lightening, "of getting one or two things for ourselves. I should not wonder if, after all, I might manage to let you have that plush cloak trimmed with fisher-tails that you asked me for at Coralie's the other day. Come! what do you say?" tapping her cheek with an air of fond friskiness.

"I say that I will not have it!" replies Sarah doggedly; "it is blood-money!"

The settlements are drawn up. Belinda's widowhood and her younger children are provided for. Bought are license and ring. The latter Professor Forth brought one day to be tried on; and Belinda, with white, shut lips, pallidly essayed it. There is no bustle of arriving parcels,

no wedding presents to be displayed. Miss Churchill has sternly insisted upon an absolute secrecy being observed as regards her engagement. She can bear to be married, but gifts and congratulations upon her marriage she could not bear. So that the comers and goers to the little house in —— Street still come and go, without suspicion that anything out of the ordinary course is brewing beneath its modest roof.

Mrs. Churchill would have preferred that the betrothal should be proclaimed from the housetops. It would give it a body and solidity that just at first she fears it lacks. An engagement known to all the world is much more difficult of rupture than one to which only the three or four persons most nearly concerned are privy.

"Belinda is so odd and crotchety," she says one afternoon, as she and Sarah are driving home through the Park together; "why, if she is in earnest, should she object to people being told? Do you think there would be any harm in my just giving a hint of it to the Crawfords, and Dalzells,

and Lady Hunt, and—and just our own intimates? They will be so hurt at being left out in the cold; and I am sure that they would give her something handsome. Even if she does not care for personal ornaments, they might give her plate; I do not suppose," with an amused smile, "that there is likely to be much plate in the Forth family!"

"And you think," retorts Sarah, with a fiery eye and a curling lip, "that the more people you tell about it the more Belinda will be nailed to keeping it! Do you think that, after all these years, I do not understand you?"

The elder woman looks rather foolish, and does not repeat her suggestion.

And now, indeed, all necessity for it is at an end. There is obviously no need to tie Belinda with the cords of convention and public opinion to her faggot and stake. The 10th of January has come, and she has as yet shown no sign of flinching. To ensure the greater privacy, the marriage is to take place at nine o'clock in the morn-

ing. Not a soul is bidden to it. There are no bridesmaids or groomsmen, no train of wedding guests.

Even Mrs. Churchill, on hearing of the earliness of the hour, has, like those wedding guests that Scripture speaks of, begged to be excused. Perhaps it is not only the raw winter morning from which she shrinks. Perhaps she is not particularly anxious to be an ocular witness of that ceremony which she has certainly speeded with her prayers.

"I hope you do not think it unkind of me, my child," she says, appearing at her dressing-room door in a pretty laced dressing-gown as she hears her granddaughter descending the stairs to the brougham; "but you know what a London church is, and you know what my neuralgia is. How nice you look!" smilingly surveying the dark, homespun suit, so dark and brown as in the shabby light to look quite black, and the rigidly plain close bonnet which her granddaughter has chosen for her wedding garments.

Belinda smiles too—a smile of which her grandmother is not particularly fond of thinking afterwards.

"Yes, do not I?" she says—"so like a bride!"

"In point of fact," continues the old lady rather hurriedly, and not much relishing the tone of this acquiescence in her compliment, "I shall be far more useful at home; I shall ensure the house being thoroughly well-warmed for you when you come back; you shall find roaring fires in every room!"

"We shall not come back," replies Belinda quietly.

"Not come back?" (with an accent of extreme surprise). "You are going abroad then?"

"No; but there is nothing to come back for."

"And whose fault is that, pray?" asks her grandmother with an uncomfortable laugh. "If I had had my way, there would have been plenty to come back for: a good breakfast; a score of people; speeches!"

"But that was not my way," replies Belinda, again faintly smiling; "and, as you say sometimes, *tous les goûts sont respectables.* I am afraid that I shall be late if I delay any longer; good-bye, granny."

She speaks the two last words quite gently and friendly, and holds out her fair cold cheek to be kissed. Mrs. Churchill is afterwards not much fonder of thinking of the feel of that cheek, than of the look of that smile before spoken of.

"I wish I had not kissed her," she says to herself fretfully afterwards, as she sits with her still pretty feet resting on the well-warmed fender in the privacy of her dressing-room, when the brougham has rolled away; "it was almost like kissing a dead person!"

And meanwhile, through the dismal morning streets, dirty with that worst of all dirtiness, dirty snow, and where the lamp-lighters have only just put out the lamps, and would have done better not to put them out at all, Belinda drives, her

sister by her side. The angry tears are raining down Sarah's face, encouraged rather than checked by their owner. In her small warm hands (for even on a bitter January morning wrath is warming) lie tightly clasped Belinda's cold ones. The shop-boys are only just beginning to take down the shutters; in the haberdashers' undressed windows, instead of costly fabrics and dainty webs, are to be seen nothing but bare boards and skeleton stands. The blue-armed housemaids are scrubbing the door-steps; through the squares the milk-carts rush.

"I wish you would cry," says Sarah presently, from among her sobs.

"Why should I?" replies Belinda calmly; "it is my own doing."

"That is the worst of it!" cries Sarah passionately; "if you were doing it for some great cause,—to save granny from the workhouse, or me from the scaffold—there would be some sense in it! there is no sense now!"

There is no sense in it! The words

keep echoing, dancing—set to a teasing tune—in Belinda's head for the rest of the way. They reach the church-door. The carriage stops.

"We have got to the gallows, it seems!" says Sarah, with a fresh burst of sobs; then, vehemently wringing her sister's hands, she cries desperately: "Belinda! it is not too late yet! there is still time! it is not too late yet to go back!"

"I have no wish to go back," replies Belinda firmly, though her voice is low and weak, and her lips are white; "why should I wish to go back, when it is my own doing?"

So they get out. At the door they are received by a Churchill cousin, who, summoned as Belinda's nearest male relative to give her away, stands awaiting them, cross and shivering.

"Has he come? is he here? I do not see him!" says Sarah, with a last flare-up of hope, peering eagerly into the church, where here and there (only here and there, for they are not nearly all lit) a gas-lamp

displays its dreary yellow flicker on the background of thick morning fog. "Yes; then"—with a sudden collapse into disappointment—"then he has not had a paralytic stroke at the last moment, worse luck!"

They walk up the aisle; a snuffy old pew-opener in a black crape bonnet preceding them; Belinda on her cousin's arm; Sarah, in her ostentatiously paraded grief, bringing up the rear. They have arrived at the altar, the candles upon which are lit, their wavering light falling upon an impatient clergyman and two elderly men; for the bridegroom has brought with him a friend of his own age and calling, whom he has summoned from Oxbridge to support him. The Churchill cousin has never before seen the bridegroom, nor has the bridegroom's friend ever before seen the bride. The opposing parties now stare at each other in unaffected astonishment. All through the service, the young Churchill, who had once himself thrown out feelers in the direction of Belinda, and had them

civilly and firmly at once returned to him, is setting himself angrily in imagination by the side of the bridegroom, and wondering what the devil Belinda can have seen in this ugly old curmudgeon to prefer to himself.

All through the service, the bridegroom's supporter is staring in gaping wonder at the beautiful broken-hearted-looking girl, who has mysteriously elected to unite her fate with that of his old friend; ruefully reflecting that she will bring certain death to the constitutionals, and the pipes, and the discussions on the *Enclitic de*, and such-like light subjects, which they have been in the habit of sharing for the best part of the last forty years. All through the service the bridegroom is peevishly glancing over his shoulder to see whence comes the draught of raw air that, despite the black velvet skull-cap with which he has furnished himself, he feels at baleful play about his ears.

Belinda alone looks neither to the

right nor to the left. If she were really the statue which her fair, still body so closely resembles, she could not be less conscious than she is of dank nipping air or curious look. She appears to listen with close attention, or is it indeed not attention, but the impassiveness of stone? Only once through all the service does her face come to life; and then it is stabbed into life, as one has heard in the grisly dissecting-room tale, of him who, thought dead, was brought back to agonizing momentary life by a knife-thrust! The knife-thrust that brings Belinda back to life lies in the words, "Forsaking all other, keep thee only unto him so long as ye both shall live."

"Forsaking all other!" She has been spared the trouble of forsaking that other. Has not he been beforehand with her? Has not he forsaken her?

Sarah, closely watching her, sees her ashy features contract in such a spasm of mortal pain, that she involuntarily starts forward. Is she going to faint? If she

faint, and is carried out of church, may not she be saved even yet? She is not yet married! The service is not yet ended! But the next glance at her face dispels the momentary hope. Belinda is not going to faint; she has gained back her rigidity. She is dead again.

It is over now; over—even to the signing of names in the vestry. The clergyman offers his congratulations, but he does it hastily and abstractedly. He is thinking whether he will have time for a good warming and breakfasting before setting off for the funeral at Kensal Green, at which he has to assist. The bridegroom's friend and the Churchill cousin also offer theirs; but those of the first sound incredulous, and those of the latter ironical. Sarah alone keeps utter silence. The brougham stands at the door, the horse fidgety and stung by the cold. A crossing-sweeper and two pinched street children are watching the strange wedding-party's exit. The bridegroom, great-coated and comfortered to the end of his long nose, is

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bidding adieu to his ally. The bride turns to her sister:

"It is done now!" she says pantingly; "there is no going back from it now!"

"None!" replies Sarah dully.

"Say something to me, Sarah; wish me something good!"

She has flung her arms round her sister in an *épanchement* most unusual with her. Her icy cheek is hard pressed against her sister's hot and tear-reddened one.

"I wish you—I wish you—" cries Sarah, stammering, what between her sobs, the almost ungovernable impulse to invoke upon her sister a speedy widowhood, and the hopelessness of finding any other wish that will not sound a mockery.

"You—you cannot find anything to wish me!" says Belinda tremulously. "You are right; there is nothing."

"I—I wish you," says Sarah, driven to desperation by this tone, and clinging convulsively to her sister as though ten bridegrooms should not force them apart—"I wish you many happy returns of the day!"

breaking into an hysterical laugh. "That is ambiguous! I may attach what meaning I choose to it."

These are the last words Belinda Forth hears, before the brougham whirls her away. The Churchill cousin takes Sarah home in a hansom, and a very unpleasant drive he has, as she cries violently the whole way, in passionate self-reproach at having found nothing kinder to say.

CHAPTER VIII.

BELINDA has been married three days. We are creatures of habit, as everyone knows; and it is surprising with what quick pliability we find ourselves cutting off and tucking in whatever angles prevent our fitting into any new niche that it may be our fate to occupy. But this process, though rapid, is usually of somewhat longer accomplishment than three days. At all events, Belinda has not yet got into the habit of being married. There still seems to her something improbable—nay, monstrous—in the fact of herself sitting opposite to Professor Forth at breakfast in their Folkestone lodgings, pouring weak tea for him out of

a Britannia metal teapot, and sedulously recollecting how many lumps of sugar he likes, as she has already discovered that he has an objection to repeating the information. Nor is it less monstrous to be warming his overcoat, and cutting his newspapers, and ordering his dinners with that nice attention to digestibility and economy which she finds to be expected of her. They have been enormously long, these three days. It seems to her as if for *months* she has been looking at those hideous ornaments on the drawing-room chimney-piece, and trying to draw the skimp summer curtains that will not draw across the shutterless windows, rattled by the wind. For months she has been listening to the eternal sighing, sobbing, whistling, howling of that same wind, and to the sea banging on the cold shore. For months she has been walking with Professor Forth up and down, up and down the Leas, six turns this way, six turns that way. For months she has been writing his letters till her hand ached, and reading aloud to him till her

voice cracked. As for the reading and writing, she cannot have too much of them —the more the better! There is nothing like occupation—a continuous, settled occupation—nothing like occupation for keeping out of one's head those words of Sarah's that ring so foolishly dinning in her ears, "There is no sense in it! there is no sense in it!" She will not listen to them. Even if they are true, of what profit to hearken to them now? And reading and writing render conversation, too, less necessary. It is certain that, however determinately anyone may have confined his or her contemplation of another person's character to the intellectual side of it, it is impossible to live with that person without discovering that he or she has another side. Belinda has already discovered that her Professor has another. It is surprising how much less of his conversation has turned during the last three days upon the problems of the mind and the sayings of the mighty dead, than upon the price of coals and the wickedness of lodging-house servants. The

first of these topics has led to the proposal that he and his bride shall henceforth content themselves with *one* fire, to be fed with (if possible) not more than two coal-boxes per day; and the second is at present employing his tongue, his eyes, his thoughts. They are at breakfast, Belinda seated behind the Britannia metal teapot, her husband facing her, a dish of fried bacon before him, which latter object is monopolizing the whole of his attention.

"It is beyond the range of possibility," he is saying slowly, "that you and I can have eaten a pound and a half of bacon in three days, and I think I noticed that you did not take any yesterday."

"Did not I?" replies Belinda indifferently; "I am sure I forget."

"And if," pursues Mr. Forth, his eyes ranging with severe scanning from the bacon-dish to the sugar-basin—"if, as Maria just now told us, those few lumps are all that remain of the pound of sugar purchased by me yesterday, it is obvious that there must be wholesale theft somewhere!"

"It is very dishonest of them," replies Belinda carelessly, putting up her hand to her hair, which, no longer tended by a maid, feels oddly loose and uncomfortable. "If you had allowed me to bring Jennings, she would have looked after everything."

"I discouraged the idea of your bringing a maid," replies he, nettled, "because I considered, and still consider, that it would have made a most unnecessary addition to our expenses. And as to our provisions," looking carefully round the room, "I see that there are several cupboards; there is no reason why they should not be kept——"

"*Bacon* kept in a cupboard in one's only sitting-room!" cries Belinda, breaking into an indignant laugh; "you cannot be serious!"

"If you are able to suggest any better way of preventing their depredations, I shall be happy to hear it," he answers tartly.

"If they ate a flitch a day," replies

Belinda hotly, and lifting her disdainful fine nose contumaciously into the air, "I should say that it was a small evil compared to our living in the atmosphere of a chandler's shop."

She rises precipitately as she speaks—to *her*, at least, Folkestone has not given an appetite—and walks to the window, where, for the rest of the breakfast hour, she presents a sociable homespun back to the economist at the breakfast-table. It is not the first time during these three days that she has discovered that his standpoint with regard to little social possibilities or impossibilities is different from her own. She had known that she did not love him, but she had not known that he wore carpet slippers in the drawing-room. A tendency towards slippers in the drawing-room, a passion for high tea, accompanied by no change of dress, are not these sufficient to wreck a bride's happiness upon? But worst of all, perhaps because latest of all, has jarred upon her this final instance of how widely asunder are their points of

view. It jars upon her still as she stands by the window after breakfast, sullenly drumming on the pane.

In the night snow has fallen, a thin sprinkling meeting even the sea's lip, advancing even to where the dull little grey waves set their chill feet; a shabby sprinkling everywhere: not a good thick cloak of snow, deep and pure, but a scanty rag, through which every footstep shows the hard dark ground. It jars upon her still, as she walks to church alone—it is Sunday morning—trying to persuade herself that she had not felt a movement of gladness on discovering that he had no intention of accompanying her. She walks along the windy cliff to where the church and the red vicarage look out seawards, falling in, as she goes, with a stream of people bound to the same goal. It is a well-fed, comfortable-looking stream flowing prosperously to God's house; smart furry mothers holding the hands of smart furry little children, fathers and tall young daughters, husbands and wives.

There is scarcely one, as young as Belinda, who is companionless. But she does not think of this.

Her eyes are turned towards the ocean, that ocean for the most part hugged by a close mist, with only one patch of faintish glory—a pale dazzle of dim gold—on which a small fishing-boat comes sailing, its homely sails transfigured as it goes. She is saying to herself, with a heart sinking so deep that she dare not gauge its profundity:

"Is *this* the man whose *mind* I have married? Is this the man who is to teach me to live by the intellect? Is this the scholar and the sage, whose teaching was to lift me out of the circle of my narrow interests into the sphere of the Universal?" she asks with contemptuous misgivings; "*this*, whose whole soul is occupied by mean parsimonies, and economies of cheese-rinds and candle-ends?"

She has reached the church, but even inside the consecrated door she finds that it is still with her. It comes between her

and the Christmas decorations; between her and the bowing congeeing clergy; between her and the prayers. A poor starling has found its way into the building. All through the service it is flying from side to side, above the heads of the congregation, under the arched roof from window to window. Children turn their heads and their eyes, idly curious to look after it. All through the sermon she hears the agonized pecking of its poor beak against the pane, in its efforts to escape. She says to herself that it is in the same plight as she. It, too, entered prison of its own accord. When the service is ended, Belinda loiters behind the rest of the congregation, in order to press half-a-crown into the pew-opener's hand—(what would Professor Forth say to such extravagance?)—and to pour into his ear an eager prayer that he will set all the church doors and windows open, to give her starling a chance of escape. But, alas! what pew-opener can ever let her out?

As she passes homewards, she finds that the day has bettered. The sun has swallowed up the mist, and now shines steadily bright, and even sensibly warm. The little waves are small and mild as summer ones, though the air is still full of penknives. Perhaps it is the increased brightness upon Nature's face; perhaps it is the two quiet hours of her own society, that have braced her to face with a greater courage the lot she has chosen, and the fried bacon that typifies it.

"I *would* do it!" she says to herself sternly, "and now it is done; now there is nothing for it but to put the best face upon it, and never to own to anyone that I would have it undone. There can never again be so bad a piece of my life as this!" (shuddering); "it is well to have the worst over first, it will be more endurable when we get to Oxbridge. I must try to learn how to look at things from his point of view, to count the grains of rice for a pudding, and save the old tea-leaves!" with a curling lip; "but *I*

will not have the bacon kept in the drawing-room!"

Her resolutions in both respects outlast the day. That to make the best of things has body enough to withstand even the close examination to which her husband subjects the Sunday roast-beef, in order to discover whether it has been robbed of any of its native suet. He has a slow munching way of eating, which fidgets her inexpressibly; but she bears that too. She even resists the temptation to look away from him. Since he is to munch opposite to her till death do them part, would it not be wiser to accustom herself to the sight? Her resolution withstands also stoutly all the little trials attendant on their afternoon constitutional. When they emerge upon the Leas, they see a broad highway of molten copper stretching across the sea to the lowering sun. Belinda asks leave to run down the many steps on the cliff's face to the water's edge, to set her feet in the foam fringe, and watch the long swell heaving ocean's sullen

breast; but the Professor will not hear of it. A certain number of brisk turns on the Leas—always the same number—is the kind of walk to which alone he gives his approbation. No stopping to look at the copper sunset, or the fair ships riding past; nothing more likely to arrest the circulation and chill the liver. They meet the same people as they met yesterday and the day before, and as they will meet to-morrow and the day after; the same bath-chairs, the same dogs. The sick, white woman with her attentive burly husband; the deformed child; the frolicsome colley dogs; the frivolous Spitzes; the little blithe Scotch terriers.

Her resolution outlasts even the twilit hour, to her the most trying of the day. If she were to consult her own wishes, there would be no such hour; no space interposed between the fading of the daylight and the lighting of the gas. But it is in Professor Forth's programme that there shall be such an interval when he leans back in his armchair, with his eyes

closed, and does not wish to be spoken to; whether in meditation or in sleep she cannot tell. There is nothing for her but to sit opposite to him, with his idleness, but without his repose. The lowered blinds prevent her looking out upon the first sunset-reddened, and by-and-by moon-silvered sea. She cannot even distinguish the lustres and the vulgar vases on the chimney-piece. She cannot even stir the fire into such a blaze as to enable her strong young eyes to read by it; for to stir the fire makes the coals burn quicker. It is the hour when the happy young build love-arbours out of, and see brave sweethearts in, the red coals. What love-arbour dare *she* build? What sweetheart dare *she* see? Then come the long hours of reading aloud. They are the most bearable of the day. It does her resolution the less credit to hold out through them. However, it does hold out. But will it endure through the next day? If it does, it must indeed be of a stout fibre. For no sooner has the next

day risen, than it is clear that there has come one of those rare scourge-days with which God sometimes lashes His world; one of those days whose date is remembered, which is held up as a standard in after years for other fell days to measure themselves by; a day that wrecks ships by fleets; that strikes down centenary oaks by scores; that whelms trains in its snowdrifts; that stiffens into frozen death the sheep on the mountain-side, and the traveller fate-overtaken in the snow-choked country lane.

Snow often comes stilly; but to-day it is blowing—blowing mercilessly: not a bluff west wind, good-humouredly roistering, but an inhuman north-easter, the furious sleet driven, raging and sweeping, by its hellish lash.

When Belinda comes down to breakfast, there is not a soul on the Leas, but the luckless baker's boy butting with bent head against the razor-edged blast. It is scarcely the day which one would have chosen to spend in a flimsily-built seaside

summer lodging-house. The Forths' lodgings are no better and no worse than most others of the class; with walls about as puny, with woodwork about as warped, with gaps between door and carpet about as wide, with curtains as miserably insufficient as most of their brethren. Though every door and window is religiously closed, there is the feeling of being sitting out of doors, only more draughty. Even in a warm, stoutly-built house one would shiver; but here! Well, here the cold is so marrow-piercing, that it usurps to itself the whole attention of the mind. It is not a subordinate, governable cold that by an effort of the will one may forget. It can never be out of the thoughts for one moment; from the hour of rising, until that of shuddering back to bed again.

The Professor, always a chill-blooded creature, sits all day with his knees within the fender, piled with every article of his own, and several of Belinda's wardrobe. Throwing economy to the winds, he has lit the gas, and piled the fire half-way up

the chimney; though whenever fresh coals are put on, a great gust of greenish smoke, furiously beaten back by the blast, comes pouring down the chimney, and suffocatingly flooding the room.

Belinda, cold as she undoubtedly is, is not near the fire. She is standing by the window, with a pot of paste and some strips of paper in her numbed hands, pasting up the apertures in the ill-seasoned shrunk window-frames, through which the wind comes icily whistling and piping. Now and again she appeals for directions to the heap of wraps beside the hearth, trying to still her chattering teeth as she does so, to keep out of her tone the intense dispiritedness which has invaded her whole being; not to listen to the ironical demon voice that whispers in her ear:

"This is the honeymoon; that is the bridegroom of your own choosing!"

All day—all day the snow swirls past. All day the sea—dimly seen, sometimes seen not at all, through the white hurricane

—booms and thunders on the shore. The snow cleaves to the window-panes, freezes there, darkens yet more the dismal room. Not a soul puts nose out of doors from the dark dawn to the soon-falling night. When at length Belinda has finished her painstaking pasting-up of the windows, she asks in a voice of would-be cheerfulness whether the blast is not sensibly lessened; but receives for answer a melancholy negative. The whirlwind from under the door is such as to laugh to scorn all remedies applied elsewhere. And one cannot paste up the door.

"But one may put sand-bags beneath it," suggests Belinda, still with that same desperate cheerfulness. "They may have sand-bags in the house! she will ring and ask!"

But there are no sand-bags, and the landlady, embittered like everyone else by the weather, tartly replies that such a thing has never before been asked for in *her* house! However, Belinda is not yet at the end of her resources.

"I think," she says, "if you would allow me to fold up all the newspapers in a tight roll, it might keep out some of the wind. Can you spare them all?—*Pall Mall*, *Spectator*, *Academy*, *Times*?"

Having received permission, she begins to turn them over, in order to select those most suitable for her purpose; her careless eye unintentionally alighting on a word here and there. The first two that she catches are her own late and present surnames. "Forth—Churchill." It is the announcement of her marriage in the *Daily News*. She drops it as if it had bitten her. The roll of newspapers is about as effective a bulwark against the wind as a child's sand-rampart is against the sea. But since she has at least done her best, Belinda considers that she has earned the right to sit down by the fire, with her fur-coat hoisted to her ears. She offers to read aloud.

"I am obliged to you," replies the Professor morosely, "but, in the present

condition of my temperature, it would be perfectly impossible for me to concentrate my attention."

He even looks rather injured when she herself takes up a book. But neither can she concentrate her attention. Her mind strays from the dreary wonder as to whether this enormous day will ever end, to the still more dreary wonder why she should wish it to end, seeing that it will only lead to another like it. There has been no break since breakfast-time, with the exception of the laying and removing of their early dinner, and the altercation about the sand-bags. No one has been near them, not even the postman! Doubtlessly every line is blocked, and all traffic suspended. The dark has long fallen; if that, indeed, can be said to have fallen which has reigned more or less all day. The gas has been turned up higher; the thin curtains drawn, with many futile jerks to the rings that will not run; the fire is new-built, and a sort of air of pseudo-

evening-comfort diffuses itself. Belinda's slow pulse begins to beat, and her blood to circulate a little more briskly. It quickens its pace perceptibly, when—oh blessed sight!—the lodging-house servant enters with a pile of letters in her chappy hand. Thank God, the line is not blocked after all! These are the London morning letters that should have come at 8 a.m. She snatches at them eagerly. They can bring her no great good news, but they make an unspeakably welcome interruption to the uniform dismalness of the long day. They remove the terrible feeling of isolation from all humankind, which hour by hour has been gaining ground upon her. There is a pile for the Professor; and for her a large fat envelope, bulging with enclosures, and directed in Sarah's hand. She draws her chair more closely to the hearth, and folds her soft furs warmlier about her. She will enjoy her letters at luxurious leisure. She unfastens the cover, and the enclosures fall out, six in number;

a note from Sarah herself, four letters addressed in well-known and on this occasion warmly-welcomed female hand-writings, and one in an unknown male hand. *Is it unknown?*

CHAPTER IX.

"Es ist eine alte Geschichte,
Doch bleibt sie immer neu;
Und wem sie just passiret,
Dem bricht das Herz entzwei."

AT first it seems so; but as she looks there rises in her memory, from which indeed it is never long absent, the image of another letter, to whose superscription this one, though less ill-written, has surely a strange likeness.

She continues to look at it; a fear too terrible for words rising in her heart, and depriving her of the power of opening it. The fire crackles comfortably. The Professor turns the page of his letter. It is his third; and she has not yet opened her first.

"I hope you have good news from home?" he says politely.

"I—I believe so," she answers stammering. "I am not quite sure yet."

She must conquer this ridiculous hesitation. Probably, certainly, she is the victim of hallucination—of an accidental resemblance. The likeness is no doubt confined to the address. As soon as she sees the letter itself, she will laugh at her own foolish fancies. She tears it open, and tremblingly turns to the signature.

There was no hallucination—no accidental resemblance! She was right. "David Rivers." For the first moment she is drowned in a rush of insensate joy, followed in one instant by such an anguish of horror as makes her for a while unconscious of everything around her—everything but that rending, burning, searing pain.

He has written to her at last! What has he to say to her *now*? To congratulate her upon her marriage? He might have spared her that thrust! She

will not read it! She will burn it unread!—by-and-by—not now!—when she can do it unobserved.

Her shaking fingers refold the paper, hide it on her lap beneath the fur, and take up another letter—Sarah's. She goes straight through it, nor till reaching the last sentence does she discover that not one word of its contents has found entry to her brain. It is no use! That letter must be read. It burns her knee as it lies on it. It is burning, burning all through her. It is better to know the worst! But to read it here under her husband's eyes—*her husband's!*

She casts at him one desperate look, and then, suddenly rising, flies out of the room. He may call after her—she thinks that he does so—but she makes no kind of answer. Up the draughty stairs she flies into her bedroom; turning the key in the lock, as she shuts the door behind her. The Professor, relenting, has given her leave to have a fire there; but the chimney smokes so furiously that it has had to be long ago

let out. The room is piercingly, savagely, truculently cold; but though she has been thinking of the cold all day, she is now not aware of it. How can one be cold with a red-hot iron in one's heart?

In a moment she has turned up the gas and lit the candles. It is well to have plenty of light by which to read one's death-warrant. But she cannot spare time to sit down. A frantic haste to possess the contents of that letter which, five minutes ago, she had thought herself capable of burning unread, has laid hold of all her trembling being.

Standing, she reads it; and this is what she reads:

'5, Paradise Row, Milnthorpe,
'Yorkshire.
'*January* 10*th*.

January 10*th*! Why, that was her wedding-day! It is not to congratulate her upon her marriage, then; he could not have known it!

"Thank God! I may write to you at

last, though I do not suppose that it will be much good even now, as I am so mad with joy that I doubt whether I shall be able to make any sense of it. You will have understood—you always understand everything—what has kept me from you hitherto. Of course you heard, as everybody did, of the bankruptcy that preceded and caused my poor father's death. Whatever you may have heard, do not for a moment believe that he was to blame for it. I am such a bad hand at writing, that I can explain to you better when we meet; but I cannot bear you to remain in such an error for a moment longer than I can help. His ruin was caused by a sudden and most unexpected rise in iron, just after he had undertaken an enormous contract to deliver many thousand tons of iron rails in America at a low price. It was a misfortune that might have happened to anyone, however long-sighted and cautious. You know what he was to me: I have often thought since of how I must have bored you bragging about him. You may

think what that home-coming was to me! Well, if there had been time for it, I think I should have given in altogether then. Happily for me there was not. If I broke down, where would mother and the young ones be? No sooner was the funeral over, than we discovered that the smash was so complete that, at all events until the affairs could be wound up—a matter probably of several years—there would be scarcely enough for mother to keep body and soul together. The boys must be educated; three of them quite little chaps. There was nothing for it but to give up whatever hopes one had of one's own! God alone knows whether or not that was a wrench. We took a little house in a dirty back street in Milnthorpe—I am writing in it now; but to-day it looks to me like a palace. I was fortunate enough to obtain a clerkship in a house, one of the partners in which had been an early friend of my father's; a clerkship which, as I was always very bad at quill-driving, and the confinement, to which I had not been used,

knocked me up, I soon exchanged for a place in the works. We got on as well as we could: mother has infinite pluck, and the young ones did their best. Sometimes I thought of writing to you. If you had ever answered a note I scrawled to you just before I left Dresden, I think I should have done so; but you did not: of course you were right. For eighteen months I worked without a holiday. Not having been brought up to it, I was at such a disadvantage with the other men. I scraped along from day to day, not daring to look much ahead, until, two posts ago, we received a letter from the lawyer of an old and distant connection of ours, of whom we knew little, and expected less, to say that he was dead, and had left £30,000 by will, to be divided amongst us. This of course makes a very fair provision for mother and the children, and leaves my arms free to work for myself. You must decide whether they are to work for you too. Is it any wonder that I cannot write sense? May I come? When may I

come? Do not keep me waiting long, or I shall come without leave. Darling! darling! darling! I suppose that I have no right to call you that, but do not be angry; I did not write it! it wrote itself, and I cannot scratch it out, it looks so pretty written! After twenty months, one might be afraid that many women had forgotten one; but you are not of those that forget! Love! have you forgotten Wesenstein?

"DAVID RIVERS."

She has read it through, without a break or a pause, to the signature. There is no more, but yet she still stands looking at it. For one all-happy moment the present is dead to her; only the past wholly lives. *Has she forgotten Wesenstein?* She smiles rosily; such a smile as has scarcely been seen to visit her face since that very Wesenstein day. "Darling! darling! darling!" She counts them. There are three. He says that they look pretty written. He is right: they have a pretty look.

A slight noise breaks her trance. It is only the Professor poking the fire in the sitting-room below; a sound plainly audible through the thin flooring. But if it had been the great Trump of Doom, it could not have more effectually blared and shivered away her visions. There is a growing wildness in her eyes, as they retrace the sentences of the just-read letter. It is a good letter. No woman need wish to have an honester or a fonder one from her own true love. It has only the one trifling drawback of having come just three days too late. It is scarcely tactful to have thrust itself thus untimely between her and the husband of her choice!

"It is my own choice," she says; "there lies the point of the joke!" and she laughs aloud. Something in the sound of her own laugh frightens her. "Am I going mad?" she asks herself.

As she speaks, she staggers to the window, and throws up the sash; whether —even in this icehouse atmosphere— gasping for yet more air, or driven by

some darker impulse. For the moment the hurricane has lulled. Outside it is all white with snow and moonshine : the moon herself not absolutely visible, too low to cut even her accustomed track upon the silvered sea, betrayed only by the sudden pale flash that each loud wave gives in turning over on the strand. Ceaselessly, as it has been snowing all day, the devilish wind has swept the pavement clean and bare. She can see the flagstones' fierce wet shine immediately beneath her. How hard they look! and at what a distance below her! One step from that easily accessible sill, and she will be for ever healed of that pain, than which none worse ever made dying man in deadly straits call upon death to set him free. But Death, the gentle genius with the reversed torch laying his soft hand, coolly liberating, on the over-weary heart, is not akin to the grisly, gory, murderous phantom that she in her misery invokes. For that dread step even *her* perfect woe has not yet ripened her. She

shivers moaning back from the razor-edged outer air, and shuts the window. She sits down by the table, and spreading out the letter before her, reads it deliberately through again. Not a tear dims her dry eye. They say that the worst of a thunder-storm is past when the rain comes. The worst of a human sorrow is past when the tear-rain comes. But Belinda's grief is far indeed from having reached that better stage. What would she not give for a few tears, or that this hideous keenness of consciousness might melt away blurred into a merciful swoon! But she is as far from the one relief as the other. If it had been written one day earlier! If she had yielded to Sarah's passionate persuasions to delay her marriage for one month! If—if! There are a hundred ifs; any one of which might have opened heaven to her! But not one of them did.

"It is my own choice!" she keeps repeating, half aloud; and then comes again that terrible impulse to laugh loudly at the

ghastly irony of it! the mirth of it! *Her own choice* to be sitting here alone and marrow-chilled—chilled, yet with a red-hot sword slowly turning and turning in her heart; afraid even to groan aloud, lest she should be overheard, instead of——

But the reverse of that picture she dare not face. That is the road that lies straight to madness. Her eye wanders wildly yet again over the page. Even it, in cruelty, seems always to fasten on the fondest phrases:

"I am so mad with joy!" "Is it any wonder that I cannot write sense?"

As she looks at the words, written in such pure, glad, good faith, but that seem to stare back at her now in grinning mockery, a great dry sob rocks her whole body to and fro. The pity, lavished hitherto on herself alone, now changes its current, and pours in bitterest flood over him. "*Mad with joy!*" until when? Until casually taking up the newspaper, he reads that on the 10th of January James Forth, Professor of Etruscan in the

University of Oxbridge, took to wife at St. Jude's Church, —— Street, Mayfair, Belinda, elder daughter of the late John Churchill, Esq., of Churchill Park, Loamshire. He will not believe it! He will think that some one has inserted it as a joke. In humiliating torrent, and with a retentiveness of memory of which she had not believed herself capable, there rushes back into her mind the stream of hold-cheap jests and jeers and quips, in which they had united the forces of their joint wits, at the expense of him who is now her husband; whom at this moment she hears shovelling coal on the fire in the room beneath her. Upon no one's testimony but her own will Rivers believe it. And what words can she find in which to tell him? Again that fierce sobbing shakes her from head to foot; but she masters it. For a few moments she sits in motionless miserable thinking. Then apparently an idea strikes her; for she rises, and taking the candle in her hand drags herself to the looking-glass. For a

moment she peers haggardly into it. At all events her face is not disfigured by tears; and the only person to whose scrutiny it will be subjected is no very nice observer of its variations.

Apparently she is satisfied with the result of her consultation, for she moves to the door, and opening and unlocking it, passes downstairs and re-enters the sitting-room.

Mr. Forth is in exactly the same posture as that in which she had left him, except that, having finished his letters, he has been able again completely to entomb himself—hands and all—in his wraps; out of which only an elderly face—its wrinkles ploughed deeper by cold and crabbedness—now peeps.

"Where have you been? What have you been doing all this time?" he inquires captiously.

"I have been in my room."

She had dreaded lest there may be something so unusual in the sound of her voice that he may turn round and look at her.

But no! he keeps his attitude of peevish crouching over the hearth.

"I hope that the fire was burning well," he says anxiously. "If the grate is of the same construction as this one, it will require constant attention."

"I—I—do not think that it was burning at all," replies Belinda uncertainly.

Till this moment it has never struck her how many degrees of frost have been adding physical to her mental suffering.

"Not burning? Not lit?"

In a moment he has leapt to the bell and violently rung it; but as Maria's movements in responding to it are marked by no greater celerity than usual, there is time for the whole of the following little dialogue before her arrival.

"Have you been pasting up the windows? If not, I am at a loss to conceive what can have induced you to spend the best part of an hour in such an atmosphere."

"I—I—have not pasted them up; I will if you like."

"You have left the door open."

"I am very sorry; I will shut it."

"What are you doing over there? Why do not you come and sit down?"

"I—I—am looking for the *Daily News!*"

"The *Daily News!* What do you want with the *Daily News?* Is it possible that you have already forgotten that you made a roll out of all the newspapers to fill the aperture under the door? not"—ungratefully—"that it has been of any use."

"I did not take the *Daily News;* I laid it aside."

She does not explain why she laid it aside.

"What do you want with the *Daily News?*" fretfully, fidgeted by her movements.

She is on her knees before the cupboard to which her husband had planned to confide the custody of his bacon, and from which she has been unable wholly to exclude jam-pots and pickle-jars. She had forgotten that they were there, and the sight of them—unlikely as it would seem that such poor trifles could either add to

or take aught from the sum of so great a grief—the sight of them seems to be the last drop that brims her cup. In after life it seems to her as if nothing had brought her so near self-destruction as those pickle-pots! *What does she want with the Daily News?* A desperate impulse seizes her. She will tell him.

"I want it in order to cut out the advertisement of our marriage, to send to——"

She pauses. The name sticks in her throat. With the best will in the world, she *cannot* pronounce it.

"To my mother?" suggests the Professor, filling up the blank conjecturally. "I have already done so."

Belinda laughs a laugh like the one that had made her question her own sanity upstairs.

"No, not to your mother; to—to—an —acquaintance of my own!"

She has found the journal now—found it in the very spot to which she herself had—as one does—unconsciously tidied it away. In an instant, as if it were printed

in her own red blood, her eye has flashed upon the announcement; picked it out from the long list. Her work-basket, in which lie the scissors with which she must cut it out, lies on the table at her husband's elbow. She stands quietly beside him, snipping, snipping delicately, in the gas-light. There must be no jagged edges; nothing that tells of emotion—nothing that will betray to him to whom it is to be sent that each cut of those fine, sharp scissors was into her own heart.

"I cannot think what is the use of occupying yourself about it to-night!" says her husband, venting the ill-humour engendered by Maria's tardiness in replying to his spells upon the nearest object—as many better men than he have done before him. "The country post is long gone. Probably all the lines are blocked——"

"I know! I know!" interrupts she harshly; "but I had rather get it done to-night! to-morrow I—I—may have forgotten!"

* * * *

She is back in her own room again, having taken the opportunity to slip out unquestioned, afforded by Maria's appearance at last — Maria in that reluctant, grudging humour with which she usually offers services, cheered by no hope of final largess; a hope that the Professor has seen fit, immediately upon his arrival, to extirpate. Belinda is in her room again alone; but alone and undisturbed she knows that she cannot long remain, but that she will be speedily followed by Maria with coal-box and shavings to re-light the extinct fire. What she has to do, must be done quickly. She opens her writing-case; takes out envelope and paper; directs the first, and then writes on the latter, in a large, painstaking, legible hand, "From Belinda Forth." It has not taken one minute in the doing: Maria's pursuing foot is not yet heard: happily she will be as slow as she can. Belinda blots it carefully; then, after steadfastly and with perfect tearlessness considering her own handiwork for the space of a moment, she

lifts the paper to her dry lips, and lays a solemn good-bye kiss upon her own name; upon the "Belinda," that is, carefully avoiding the "Forth." She has no manner of doubt that he will find it there: and who can grudge them such a parting embrace?

Then, without any further delay, she folds the paper, inserts in it the advertisement, closes and stamps the envelope. It is done! accomplished! and now that it is so, an intense restless craving seizes her, that it should be on its journey. In any case, it cannot leave Folkestone to-night; but at least she might do her part. It might be committed to the post. The thought of it lying here all night; meeting her again in the morning — God above her! what will that morning waking be! — is more than she can face. But to whom can she confide it? To Maria? That high-spirited person would flatly refuse to brave the elements on such a night; and neither man nor mouse could blame her. To that grimy Gibeonite—the boot and

shoe boy? He would infallibly commit it to his breeches-pocket, and dismiss it from his mind. Why should not she take it herself? There is a pillar-post not twenty yards from their door. The thought has no sooner crossed her mind than it is half way towards accomplishment.

In a moment she has taken hat and additional furs from the wardrobe; has fastened them on as quickly as her trembling fingers will let her, and has stolen downstairs, creeping on tiptoe past the sitting-room door; a needless caution, for the Professor, though not at all deaf, has no longer that fineness of hearing which is spared to few of us after forty. Neither does she, as she feared she would, meet Maria and the coal-box. The hall-door is not locked, and opens easily; rather too easily indeed, for no sooner is it unlatched than a force as of ten thousand Titans violently pushing dashes it back. It is all that she can do, after repeated efforts, and putting forth her whole strength, to shut it behind her. When she at length succeeds,

it closes with a bang that—as she is aware by former experience—makes every floor leap.

Again she laughs out loud. The temporary moonlit lull is over; the cloud-rack has sponged out moon and sea. The great hurricane is awake and in wrath again. There seems to be nothing in all creation but himself and his terribler snow-sister. The air is so full of the white flurry—close and fine as flour—that it makes breathing difficult. Belinda gasps. She has to stand still for a moment, that her feet may grasp firm hold of the ground, else will the north-easter, in one of its furious freaks, take her bodily off them. Then she staggers resolutely on again; a lonely fighter through the raging winter night. Of every slightest lull she takes advantage to quicken her pace. Now and again she turns her back upon the suffocating snow in order to breathe. But not for one moment does she repent of having come. She feels no hostility towards, no fear of, the dreadful elements. Is not she as desperate as

they? The hand-to-hand fight with them does her good. It seems to lift some of the lead from her brain; to set further away from her that madness that had loomed so near. But the twenty yards seem more like twenty miles.

She has reached the pillar-post at last—an opportune momentary lifting of the storm revealing to her its snow-whitened red—has found the aperture, and has dropped into it the letter so carefully, painstakingly kept dry beneath her cloak. Yes! it is gone! gone past recall! as past recall as the wood at Wesenstein; as the friend on whose coffin we have seen fall the first cruel spadeful of earth.. But of this she has no time to think. A fresh frenzy of the tornado obliges her to cling half-stunned to the pillar; and the moment that she looses her hold, the snow-wind takes her in its fearful hands and hurls her back along the Leas.

For one dread moment it seems to her that it is about to hurl her far away over the cliff into the awful lap of the bellowing

waves that, even now, she can hear in the darkness savagely tearing at the great hewn stones of the quay. That one instant reveals to her that the life she had thought herself capable of throwing away is still sweet.

By a great effort her feet recover their hold of the ground which has fled from beneath them; but not until she has been swept far past the house to which she is struggling to return. Battling, blinded, and dizzy; bewildered by the darkness, and by the hopeless uniformity of the row of buildings, it is long before, groping for the door that continually eludes her, she at length finds it; at length she finds herself within its shelter.

Maria does not recognise her at first, so battered and snow-covered is she; but Belinda pays no heed to her expressions of incredulous astonishment. It is possible that she may be so deafened by the elemental roar as not to hear them.

Without much consciousness of how the intervening stair-flights were climbed, she

finds herself again in her room. The gas is still turned high up, as she had left it. Maria has at length relit the fire; there is plenty of light for her to see her bridal chamber by. Plenty of light, too, to see the blotting-pad on which she had so lately blotted the three words of her *billet de faire part.*

She takes it up, and holds it to the looking-glass. How plainly the three words come out; not a letter, not a stroke missed!

"*From Belinda Forth.*" She mutters them over and over under her breath. "From Belinda Forth!" "From Belinda Forth!"

She is roused by a voice calling from below:

"Belinda! Belinda!"

It is her husband. Let him call! The summons is repeated with more stress and urgency:

"Belinda! Belinda!"

Is not it the voice which will go on calling "Belinda!" through life? Is not it

the voice to which she herself has given the right to call Belinda; to command Belinda; to chide Belinda; immeasurably worst of all, to *caress* Belinda? Of what use, then, to break out thus early into senseless, bootless revolt? She hastily shakes the powdery snow from her clothes, drags off her soaked shoes, twists afresh her wet and streaming hair, and goes decently and orderly down again; decently and orderly to all appearance, for who can see the wheels that are whirring in her head, and the flashes of uneasy light before her eyes?

She finds her bridegroom in his former attitude: it seems to her as if she could have better borne him and it, if he had changed his position ever so little. But no! he is still *mumping*, round-backed, over the fire.

"I called repeatedly," he says, with a not altogether blamable irritation; "is it possible that you did not hear me?"

There is no answer, the wheels in her head are going so fast.

"Where have you been? what have you been doing?"

"I have been out."

"*Out!* You must be a madwoman!"

"So I sometimes say to myself," replies she very distinctly, and looking straight at him as she speaks.

"And may I ask," continues he sarcastically, "what induced you to choose this peculiarly tempting evening for a stroll?"

"I went to post my letter."

"Pshaw!"

She has taken her former seat opposite to him. The north-easter's lash has whipped up a royal red into her cheeks, usually so far too pale.

"There is no accounting for taste," she says slowly; "mine has often been blamed. *You*, at least, have no right to complain of it. Shall I read to you?"

As she speaks, she takes up the book laid down over-night, and without further permission launches into the first paragraph she sees. She has been conscious,

on coming into the now really warm room out of the frozen stinging air, of an odd sensation in her head. It feels light and swimming, but she reads on. Now and then the type waves up and down before her like the furrows of a ploughed field; but she reads on. The matter of the book and the matter of her thoughts are woven hopelessly together like warp and woof, but she reads on:

"'If it could be demonstrated that any complex organ existed which could not possibly have been formed by numerous successive slight modifications' *(in how many years am I likely to die?)* 'my theory would absolutely break down. But I can find out no such case. No doubt many organs exist of which' *(can the worm that never dies sting more sharply than this?)* 'we do not know the transitional grades.'"

How the print is jigging and bowing; but it will come straight and still again just now. She reads on.

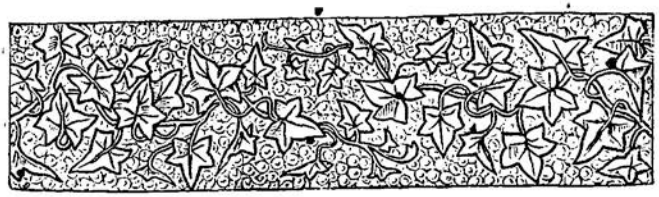
"Pray repeat that last paragraph; I am

unable to follow you; you are making nonsense of it!"

But instead of complying, Belinda tumbles the volume noisily down into the fender, and falls off her chair after it. Her wish is fulfilled: she has fainted!

PERIOD III.

"Love goes towards love as schoolboys from their books;
But love from love towards school with heavy looks."



CHAPTER I.

THE winter, with its terrible stress and fury, is over and past. People sitting in blooming spring gardens or by widely-opened windows, talk comfortably, with lips no longer chapped, of the great snow-storm, and compare notes as to the amount of personal inconvenience and discomfort to which it had exposed them. Anecdotes of the awful night spent in snow-stopped trains have formed the convenient opening for many a dinner talk; the anxiety on the part of each interlocutor to prove that he or she had suffered more than the other, leading to intimacy before soup is well over. Of its ferocity and its devil-work few overt traces now remain,

except killed laurel bushes and rare thrushes. Out of how many sweet little throats full of music has it pinched the tender life! But over its wrecks the sea rolls; and in the bottomless sea of mothers' hearts its drowned sailors lie buried. And does the analogy between the material and the spiritual world hold good? Does the sea of oblivion smoothly heave and largely sweep above the soul that went down on that dread night? Does no spar pierce the flood to show where that good ship foundered?

* * * * *

It would be the opinion of outsiders, who have not visited Oxbridge—if they had formed an opinion at all upon the subject, and were asked for it—that the inhabitants of that university town dwell in grey and ancient houses, time-coloured, and with flavours of old learning still hanging about their massy roof-trees. In point of fact, their lives are passed for the most part in flippant spick and span villas

and villakins, each with its half acre of tennis-ground and double daisies, all so new that scarcely anyone has had time to die there, though numerous people have taken leave to be born there, and forming in their *ensemble* an ugly, irrelevant, healthy suburb, that would not disgrace a cotton city of to-day.

It is mid-May, and the hour is one of the afternoon ones; an hour at which luncheon is already forgotten, though tea still smiles not near. Along the shining river, a mile away, eight-oars, four-oars, skiffs are flashing. Scores of happy boys are tearing down the path alongside, keeping company with their boats, exhorting, admonishing, shouting themselves hoarse. But their noise, though strong are their young lungs, does not reach in faintest echoes to the quiet drawing-room, where the as quiet lady sits, head on lily hand, beside the window, staring out at her plot of forget-me-nots and the gold shower of her two laburnum trees.

Warm as the day is, a fire burns on the

hearth; a fire whose inconvenient heat Belinda is languidly trying to counteract by the agency of the fan, slowly waving in her unoccupied hand. It is too hot even for Slutty, who, shortly panting in her sleep, lies cast on her fat side in a cool corner. Upon Slutty's figure, an academic life, and the total absence of the thinning emotion of envy, and of the bad but emaciating passion of jealousy (an absence caused by the fact of her being sole dog of the establishment, and having no longer any cause for suffering from Punch's tinselly accomplishments) has begun to tell. She could not well look stouter or less intellectual if she were one of the old Fellows of St. Bridget's.

When last we saw Belinda, she was lying grovelling among cinders and fire-irons in a fender. Now she is sitting placid and upright on a window-seat. Is the change that has taken place in her soul's attitude as much to her advantage as that which has effected itself in her body's? Who can tell? She is past the age when a smeared

face, puckered lips and bawling cries mean grief; when ruddy cheeks and shouting laughter mean joy. She does not look particularly happy, perhaps, but which of us is conscious of looking specially radiant as he or she sits alone, with no one to summon to the surface of the skin that latent cheerfulness, of which few have enough to spend it on ourselves alone? And yet, at this moment, the thoughts passing through her mind are not disagreeable ones; scarcely thoughts indeed, lazy summer impressions rather, of the pleasantness of the tiny sky-coloured meadow that lies, all turquoise, under her eyes, and calls itself her forget-me-not bed; of the round mother-swallow's head, peeping over the nest beneath the eaves. At some further thought or sensation, a slight but definite smile breaks up the severe lines of her young yet melancholy mouth. At the sound of the opening door, however, in one instant it is dead.

"I find you unoccupied!" says her husband, entering and advancing towards her,

with that shuffling gait which plainly tells of slippers (she has not then been able to break him of carpet slippers).

"If I am unoccupied it is for the first time to-day!" she answers coldly.

"Since you are at leisure," he pursues—his want of surprise at her frigid tone betraying that it is her habitual one—"I have the less scruple in claiming your services."

"What is it that you want?" she asks, lifting her eyes to his face. It is pleasant to be looked full at by a handsome woman; but if she has, before looking at you, taken care to put as much frost as they can hold into her fine blue eyes, the pleasure is very sensibly lessened. "What do you want? We cannot surely be going to have any more Menander to-day; and I have written all your letters—they lie on your study-table, and I have exactly followed your directions as to each."

"It is precisely upon that subject that I wished to speak to you" rejoins he, glancing at a paper in his hand. "You have

by no means succeeded in expressing the exact shade of meaning I wished to convey in this letter to Herr Schweizer of Göttingen, with regard to the new 'Fragment of Empedocles;' and I am afraid that I must trouble you to re-write it."

"And I am afraid that I must trouble you to excuse me," replies she quietly, but with asperity; "my tale of bricks for to-day is really complete."

There is a moment's silence, during which Belinda turns her head pointedly away towards the laburnum tree and the emerald grass; but the Professor shows no signs of retreating.

"If I were taking you from any other employment, I might hesitate," he says, with peevish pertinacity; "but since you are wholly unoccupied——"

"I am unoccupied at this particular moment," answers she, with an accent of carefully elaborated patience, which, to the meanest observer, would betray the depths of her impatience; "but in five minutes I shall not be unoccupied; in five minutes I

set off to the station to meet Sarah, who, as you are aware, is to arrive by the 4.35 train. You do not, I suppose, wish me to take a hansom?" (with a faint sarcastic smile of a very different quality from that little one lately addressed to the swallow and the flowers), "and the day is too warm for it to be possible to walk fast."

At the mention of Miss Churchill, a distinct new crumple of ill-humour has added itself to the already numerous wrinkles of Mr. Forth's face.

"I am unable to see that any obligation to meet the train lies upon you," he says obstinately; "your sister is eminently well able to take care of herself!"

Belinda shrugs her shoulders.

"It is a mere matter of habit, of course," she says in a key of low resentment. "If you have been born in a walk of life in which it is habitual to you to push and elbow for yourself, of course there is no reason why you should not enjoy it; but you must remember that this is not Sarah's case; and since you declined to extend

your hospitality to her maid, she is alone."

At the end of this conciliatory speech she stops, and there is a pause, which the Professor shortly breaks.

"If you think it necessary," he says grudgingly, "I am willing to send a servant to meet your sister; but I must request you to abandon the idea of going yourself, by which means you will be left free to render me the trifling service I require of you."

"You insist upon your pound of flesh, in fact!" cries she, rising suddenly; her body trembling, and her great eyes lightening with anger and disappointment. "Well, you are more fortunate than your prototype! You will get it."

To his death-day, the German savan will never suspect with what hotly raging and rebellious fingers were penned those polite, lucid, and erudite lines upon Empedocles' newly-discovered "Fragment," which he shortly received.

It is long before the Professor can satisfy

his own fastidious ear and captious mind as to the fitness of the phrases to be employed. Many a sheet is angrily torn across by Belinda; many a fresh one is sullenly begun before her task is ended—before her "guide, philosopher, and friend," induing, with her aid—aid given grudgingly and not unasked—his cap and gown, leaves her side to attend a college meeting. Not until the banging of the house-door tells her that he is really gone, does she give herself the indulgence of an enormous sigh.

Throwing herself back in the leathern chair, in which she has been sitting at the writing-table, with weary long arms clasped behind her neck, and dogged eyes staring at the flies on the ceiling—

"God loveth a cheerful giver!" she says aloud. "*He* is not much like God!" (to a woman, the man that she loves and the man that she hates are equally nameless, equally *he*). "So as he gets his pound of flesh, his tale of bricks, what does he care?"

As she speaks, acrid tears issue from their hidden ducts, and brim her eyes; but she shakes them vehemently away. She will not give to Sarah's penetrating eye the chance of seeing that she has wept.

"I *will* not be pitied!" she says, rising, and pulling herself together; "she *shall not* pity me! no one shall!"

She goes away to her own room, changes her gown for a fresher one, dresses her hair more becomingly, and practises looking happy in the glass. Before she has nearly perfected herself in this accomplishment, she is driven from it by the sight and sound of a slow fly, rocking top-heavily under a gigantic dress-basket, which is making for her gate. Sarah is here, and she will not be at the door to welcome her. The thought lends wings to her young heels, and the colour and the smile that she has been vainly aiming at, to her cheeks and lips. Five minutes ago she did not think that anything could have caused her such a throb of pleasure as the dear old sound of that jovial high laugh, as

the sight of that Dresden china face and of those monstrously irrational shoes are now giving her. When they lived together, they seldom or never kissed each other. Now they cannot hold each other tight enough. Is it only Sarah that Belinda is kissing? Is not it dead youth, dear love, sweet Wesenstein, too, that she is so straitly embracing?

Over the souls of both sisters—the sad elder and the radiant younger—the recollection of their last miserable parting on that hideous January morning has poured! For a moment or two neither of them could have uttered a syllable, had you paid them a thousand pounds a word. They are brought back to common life by the sound of very small jingling bells, and by a sensation as of something tightly wound round their legs. It is Punch, who, unmindful of the chain that has bound him all the way down from London, and delighted to be again in the fresh air and among friends, is tearing wildly round, offering eager but unreciprocated greetings to

Slutty, who, dodging away from him, shrewish and snarling, practically refuses to admit him as an acquaintance at all.

"Why, Punch!" says Belinda, with a rather unsteady laugh, dropping on her knees, taking the excited little dog under the arms, and looking kindly in his Ethiop face; "*you* here? and who invited *you*, pray?"

"I am afraid that nobody invited him," replies Sarah demurely; "but he was so sure that it was an oversight, and he says Jane is no companion, and he sent so many messages to Slutty, that I thought it was the simplest plan to bring him; do you mind?" with the old wheedling in her voice and her saucy eyes.

"Do *I* mind?" repeats Belinda, with a reproachful yet apprehensive stress upon the pronoun, passing her lips lightly over the top of his tawny head. "Punch! is it likely *I* should mind?"

"Will *he* mind?" inquires Sarah, speaking very low, and mouthing a good deal, as though labouring under a misgiving that

the person of whom she speaks is in hiding behind the door.

"He is not fond of dogs," answers Belinda evasively, her face suddenly darkening as if a light had been blown out in it. "Slutty exists only on sufferance, do not you, Slutty?"

"Whew—w!" says Sarah, pulling a long face, and with a low whistle; "and shall I, too, exist only on sufferance, pray?"

Belinda is saved from the necessity of answering a question, her reply to which must have been either an incivility or a lie, by the fact that they have now entered the house, and that her sister's roving eyes and attention are claimed by other objects. Preceded by the dogs, Slutty churlishly growling, and Punch animatedly sniffing, they reach the drawing-room.

"Not such a bad room!" says Sarah patronizingly, looking round; "better than I expected; only it wants pulling about."

"Mr. Forth does not like rooms pulled about."

The other breaks into a laugh.

"*Mr. Forth!* Is it possible that after six months he is still *Mr. Forth?*"

"What else should he be?" says Belinda, with stiff embarrassment; "he has not yet been raised to the peerage. He is not 'Lord Forth'!"

"I shall call him 'James'!" says Sarah firmly; "I am sure that he will wish me to call him 'James'!"

Mr. Forth's wife laughs grimly.

"It will at least have the charm of novelty for him!"

There is such a bitter dryness in the quasi-playfulness of her tone that Sarah stops suddenly short in her critical survey of the early English chairs, and the Albert Dürer etchings, in which Oxbridge drawing-rooms delight; and focussing her elder with her two insistant eyes, says, taking her the while firmly by both wrists:

"Come now; we are alone; tell me, how does it work? has it answered?"

But Belinda shakes off the small strong hands as Samson shook off the tough withes.

"You must see the rest of the house," she cries, beginning to talk rapidly and rather loudly, and absolutely ignoring the question addressed to her; "you must see my room; your own room—yours looks upon the tennis-ground. Have you brought your racquet and your shoes? we must have some tennis!"

Sarah does not press the subject so obviously avoided, but as she follows her sister upstairs she repeatedly shakes her head.

"This is my room," says Belinda, as they reach the landing, throwing open doors as she speaks. "This is—*his*" (with a slight hesitation before the pronoun, that shows that only the dread of a repetition of her sister's ridicule has kept her from designating her husband by the formal style and title which she habitually employs towards him); "and this!' (not opening, but simply indicating a third door), "this is old Mrs. Forth's."

"Oh, do take me in! do introduce me!" cries Sarah eagerly; "it has been the

dream of my life to see his mother! You will not mind my saying so, but there is something so humorous in his having a mother."

"It would be no use," replies Belinda, not offering to comply with this request; "she would probably mistake you for her son."

"Well, we *have* a look of each other," cries Sarah delightedly; "but is she as bad as that?" arching her eyebrows till they almost meet, and are lost in her hair.

Belinda nods in acquiescence.

"And does she *never* stop asking questions?"

"Never."

"And do you always answer them?"

"Poor old woman! why not? if I were not answering hers I should only be answering some one else's."

There is such a weary, devil-may-carishness in her tone, that again her sister's eyes flash investigatingly upon her; but this time Belinda has been too quick for her,

and, avoiding their scrutiny, is doing the honours of a fourth room.

"And this is yours," she says, a smile such as the one with which she had welcomed her sister sweetening and gentling the now habitual sullenness of her face; "it smells good, does not it?"

"Why, you have given me all your flowers!" cries Sarah, burying her face in a bowl of freshly picked narcissus. "I noticed that there was scarcely one in the drawing-room."

"Mr. Forth dislikes the smell of flowers," replies Belinda. She says it in a tame level voice; not as making a complaint, but simply as stating a fact.

"He seems to have a good many dislikes," says Sarah drily.

Belinda lets the remark fall upon silence.

CHAPTER II.

DINNER has been early, and is over. The sisters stand, each cooling a fiery cheek against the woodwork of the drawing-room window, while the latest blackbird is singing his version of "Glory to Thee, my God, this night," and the laburnum's lithe bunches hang yellow against almost as yellow a sunset.

"Does he *never* open a window?" asks Sarah, greedily thrusting out her head into the cool greenness of the very respectably grown clematis and jessamine that climb the house-wall.

"*Never!*"

"Then I should make a point of falling

off my chair in a faint regularly every day, at dinner, until he did."

"You would fall off your chair in a faint every day until the Day of Judgment, in that case," replies Belinda, with stony quiet.

"*But* for the stewpan atmosphere," continues Sarah, heaving her white chest in a deep and vigorous inhalation, "it really did not go off so badly; at first there seemed a trifling awkwardness—I think, Punchy, that you would have done as well on the whole to remain at your town house—but my fine tact soon smoothed it over."

"You did not call him 'James,' however," replies Belinda, with a short sarcastic laugh.

"Well, no," replies Sarah a little blankly, and for once in her life making no attempt at repartee or explanation. "I did not." But the next moment—"How soon do we go?" cries she joyously. "St. Ursula's is the largest college in Oxbridge, is it not? Will all Oxbridge be there to meet the Duke? But I suppose you are all much

above setting any store by royalties! It is only the empire of the mind," pompously, "to which you attach any value!"

"*Is it?*" replies Belinda expressively.

"Now I am the common British flunkey," continues Sarah confidentially; "and so used you to be! I *love* royalties; there is nothing too small for me to hear about them. I should be thoroughly interested to learn how many pairs of stockings the Queen has, and whether she takes sugar in her tea."

Belinda laughs.

"*Everybody* will be there, then?" resumes Sarah in a voice of the extremest exhilaration, "and you will introduce me to *everybody*. What will they think of me? Will they expect me to say anything clever? Will they like me?"

"H—m!" replies Belinda dubiously, scanning affectionately from head to foot the seductive but not altogether academic figure before her; "I doubt it!"

"After all, they must be human," says Sarah philosophically. "When one has

pierced the thick crust of their erudition——"

"Perhaps in some cases not so very thick," interposes Belinda ironically.

"One will find a human heart beating beneath—a heart that may be punctured by my little darts, eh?"

"Possibly!" in a by no means confident tone.

"I shall devote myself chiefly to the undergraduates, I think," says Sarah thoughtfully. "Do you know many? do you see much of them?"

Belinda shrugs her handsome shoulders indifferently.

"Poor boys! they come to call; but they are too much afraid of me to open their lips. I have lost none of my power of inspiring terror," she adds with a bitter smile. "It is the one of my gifts that I keep in its entirety."

"We will change all that," says Sarah piously: "the reign of fear is over; that of love is begun!"

Belinda has moved to the middle of the

room, and is occupied in pulling down the central gas-jet, and lowering the gas, harshly glaring under its globes. Her *pose*—wreathed head thrown back, and long bare arm roundly lifted—brings into evidence the finest curves of her noble figure.

"And do not they admire you either, *par hasard?*" asks Sarah, in a voice of affectionate incredulity.

Belinda shakes her head.

"If they do, they disguise it admirably. Stay!" with a gesture of recollection; "now I come to think of it, I believe that one young person of an æsthetic tendency was once heard to observe that I was 'great and still'; but that is the only civil speech I have reaped in six months, and even that one is perhaps a little ambiguous."

"*Great and still!*" repeats Sarah, giggling; "well, at all events they shall not say that of me!"

She is still chuckling, when the opening door admits her brother-in-law. At once

her chuckle has an inclination to die, but she bravely resists it.

"I appeal to you," she says, going boldly up to him. "Belinda has been taking away your town's character; she says that she is not at all admired here, and that neither shall I be. Is it true? is it possible?"

It is certainly well to be on easy terms with your brother-in-law; but, in a case so exceptional as that of Miss Churchill, it is perhaps hardly wise to address him with an alluring archness that may remind him of former disasters. At all events, in the present case it is not successful.

"I am afraid that I must ask you to excuse me," he says sourly, turning on his heel. "I must refer you to some one better qualified to give an opinion on such a point. Belinda, I must request your assistance with my gown."

There is something in his tone so unequivocally unplayful, that Sarah slinks away snubbed, and for the moment robbed of all her little airs and graces; and Belinda rises with rebellious slowness, flame in her

eye and revolt in her nether lip, to render the grudging aid demanded of her. As her reluctant hand holds the gown for her husband to put on, they both find themselves unintentionally standing plump and full before a rather large mirror, inevitably facing their own figures, thus brought into sudden juxtaposition.

Belinda is in gala-dress. In honour of the Duke, and for the first time since her marriage, Oxbridge is to see her neck and shoulders. Upon their smooth sea of cream, unbroken by any trifling necklet—a sea that flows unrippled over the small collar-bones—the gas-lamps throw satin *reflets;* a little chaplet of seasonable cowslips clasps her well-set head, and wrath has borrowed love's red pennon and planted it in her cheeks. She looks a magnificent embodiment of youth and vigour, dwarfing into yet meaner insignificance the parched figure beside her.

Mrs. Forth casts one pregnant look at the two reflections, and then hearing, or feigning to hear, a sound of suppressed

mirth behind her, she says, in a clear, incisive voice:

"What are you laughing at, Sarah? Are you admiring us? Are you thinking what a nice-looking pair we are?"

She lays a slight but cruel accent on the noun. *Pair*, indeed! From Fate's strangely jumbled bag were never two such odd ones sorted out before. The Professor has turned sharply away, but not before his wife has had the satisfaction of seeing that her shot has told; but Sarah maintains a scared silence. The fly is late in arriving. Probably it has had many freights to take up and put down on this festal night before the Forths' turn comes. At length, however, and just as Sarah is beginning wistfully to interrogate her Louis Quinze shoes as to their powers of reaching St. Ursula and H. R. H. on foot, it drives up, and they all get in. Possibly Belinda, though she makes no approaches towards a verbal *amende*, may be remorseful for her spurt of malevolence. At all events, she offers no objection to the raising of the window

on her side; nor does she, even by a pardonable gasp or two, or an obtruded fanning, resent the insult to the summer night.

The lateness of their fly has retarded them so much, that instead of being first at the rendezvous, as is the Professor's usual habit, they see, on reaching St. Ursula's, the great quadrangle that the proudest churchman built filled with every carriage and bath-chair that Oxbridge's modest mews can boast; filled, too, with capped men and hooded women, hurrying to the goal. They have trodden the low-stepped stone stairs, along whose side lie unwonted banks of green moss that smells of cool, woodland places, planted with young field flowers; have passed the one slender shaft that, upspringing, bears the vaulted roof, and its loveliest stone fans, and have entered the lordly hall, where Elizabeth Tudor once saw Masks, and where one of the sons of her latest successor is listening with a courteous patience, probably superior to hers, to such improve-

ments upon the barbarous Mask and obsolete Allegory as the nineteenth century, rich in the spoils of its eighteen grandfathers, can afford him. In the present instance, the substitute offered is a tale told, not by an idiot, but by an excessively hot young man, striking occasionally sensational chords on the piano, at which he is seated upon the raised daïs, where the "Fellows'" table is wont to stand—a monstrously long tale about a signalman, who, while busied in working his points, sees his infant, through some glaring domestic mismanagement, staggering across the metals at the precise moment when an express train is due. The struggle between his emotions as a parent and as a pointsman is so mercilessly protracted, that the audience, unable to bear the prolonged strain upon their feelings, are relieving themselves by a good deal of *sotto voce*, or not quite *sotto voce* conversation. But the Prince sits immovably polite, not permitting himself even one aside to his *sémillante* hostess, who, all loyal smiles, is

posed in glory on a chair in the front rank beside him.

Large as is the assemblage, so nobly proportioned is the great room, that there is no crowd. Every woman has put on her best gown; and every woman has the satisfaction of thinking that every other woman has seen, is seeing, or will fully see it; not, indeed, to do them justice, that this is a consideration much likely to engage the attention of the Oxbridge ladies. Thanks to the height of the carved oak roof, whither the vapours can ascend, below it is cool and fragrant. With the one emphatic exception of the detailer of the signalman's perplexities, scarce one of the living guests has a more heated air than the brave line of judges, bishops, philosophers, premiers—St. Ursula's dead glories—looking down in painted tranquillity from the walls.

"You must introduce me to everybody, and tell me who they are, and what they have done, so that I may say something suitable," says Sarah, in a flutter of pleasure,

looking beamingly round on the, to her, eccentric throng of black-gowned M.A.'s, with their flat college caps tucked under their arms; of velvet-sleeved proctors, etc.

"For heaven's sake, do not try!" says Belinda, in serious dissuasion, "or you will be sure to make a mess of it!"

Sarah shrugs her white shoulders. She is so clamorous to be presented to everyone, that Belinda, after patiently pointing out to her, and, where feasible, making her personally acquainted with the owners of many of the local, all the half-dozen national, and the one or two European reputations that grace the room, at length strikes work.

"You are insatiable!" she says. "You are as bad as Miss Watson!"

"Unberufen!" cries Sarah, with a shudder that is not all affectation, "do not mention that accursed name; I could have sworn that I heard her voice just now!"

The room is fuller than it was. About the door, indeed, and the lower part of the

hall, circulation is still easy; but who would be content with elbow-room at a lower end, when the sight of a genuine live English royal Duke—no dubious Serene German—is to be fought for at the upper?

"And you say that we are not loyal!" says Belinda, with that irony now so frequently assumed by her, as they, too, push and jostle their forward way. They have to push and jostle for themselves.

Immediately upon their entry, their natural pusher and jostler, the Professor, has quitted them for associates more akin in age and conformable in tastes than the two handsome girls assigned by a sarcastic Providence to his jurisdiction. As they so work slowly forwards, gaining a step a minute, they are conscious of a disturbed heaving of the wave of humanity behind them—as when the ocean is ploughed by some puissant steamer, or monstrous shark. At the same instant a familiar voice, whose accents Sarah had already but too truly caught, breaks in brazen certainty upon their ears:

"I am sure I beg a thousand pardons! but in a crush of this kind it is quite unavoidable. I really must beg you to make way for me! I am naturally anxious to get to the top of the room, having a personal acquaintance with the Duke, or what really amounts to the same thing."

The loud voice grows nearer, the wave-like swell heavier. She is close behind them now.

Belinda has turned white and sick. That dreadful voice! Even here, on this hot May night, in the thick festal crowd, of what power is it to re-create for her that miserable fog-stained Christmas morning, on which, in her madness, she had allowed a few senseless words uttered by that brutal voice to seal her doom for her.

"Speak to her!" she says, in a choked whisper to her sister. "I cannot."

"Hold your head down!" rejoins the other, hastily putting into practice her own precept, and burying her nose in the lilies of the valley on her breast; "perhaps she will not see us!"

But when did Miss Watson ever fail to see anyone?

One final oaring of her powerful arm has brought her alongside of them.

"Belinda! Sarah!" she cries loudly, seeing that her mere presence, although sufficiently obvious, has apparently failed to attract their attention; "do not you know me? Emily Watson? Dresden? Has anything been going on? have I lost much?—I could not possibly get here before—quite a sudden thought my coming at all. I heard that the Sampsons were coming down to see their boy, who is at King's; so it struck me I would join them and come, too. I took them quite by surprise—met them at the station. 'Why not see Oxbridge all together?' I said; 'halve the expense, and double the pleasure!'"

She pauses out of breath, and looks eagerly onwards towards the spot where, beyond his mother's struggling lieges, the Prince sits, cool and civil, with his suite on their row of chairs.

"I was so afraid that the Prince might be

gone," pursues she volubly; "the royalties sometimes go so early, you know. Have you been presented to him? Do you know him? well, enough to present me? No? Well, then I must re-introduce myself: I have no doubt that a word will suffice to recall me to H.R.H.'s recollection. Royal memories are proverbially good, you know. I must get hold of his equerry; I know him quite well—once crossed over in the same steamer from Newhaven to Dieppe with him."

The last few words are thrown back over her shoulder, as she has already resumed her vigorous fight onwards.

With fascinated eyes they watch her athlete's progress to the front. The human billows part before her. The crowd lies behind her. She has reached smooth water and the Prince.

The signalman's troubles are by this time drawing to their close. His rosy babe has been found lying smiling on the line; the express train having, contrary to its usual habit, passed over the pretty inno-

cent without inflicting a scratch. Most people draw a long breath; but whether at the babe's immunity or their own, who shall decide?

"She is making him shake hands with her!" says Sarah, in a shocked voice, standing on tiptoe, and stretching her neck.

It is too true. In defiance of etiquette and despite the horrified look of the hostess, Miss Watson is warmly grasping her Duke's hand. Against the background of wall and chairs her figure stands out plainly silhouetted—fringe, garish evening-dress, and hot red neck! To their ears come even fragments of her resonant speech: "Your equerry, sir!" "Newhaven!" "Sea-sick!"

"I should like to sit down," says Belinda, in a spent voice.

This is easier said than done. By slow degrees, however, they succeed in edging out of the crowd; and are lucky enough to find an unoccupied sofa, upon which Belinda seats herself; and whither, presently, various of her acquaintance come and exchange remarks with her upon the success

of the entertainment, the excellence of the supper, the affability of the Prince, etc.

In one of the intervals between two of these fragments of conversation she perceives that her charge has left her side; but it requires no very distant excursion of the eye to discover her standing at the supper-table, an ice in her hand, having, by the agency of one of her just-made acquaintance, effected an introduction to a good-looking undergraduate, who in return is presenting to her a second, who in his turn will obviously present to her a third and a fourth.

A little mob of young men is beginning to gather round her. A moment more, and, her ice finished, followed by her *cortège*, Sarah returns to her sister, winking so deftly as to be invisible to the outer world as she comes.

"Belinda," she says, "I want to introduce to you Mr. Bellairs, who tells me that he plays tennis remarkably well" (an indistinct disclaimer from the blushing Bellairs); "and Mr. Stanley, who plays very nicely

too; and Mr. De Lisle, who thinks he would play very nicely if he had a little more practice."

Belinda laughs slightly, amused at the glibness with which her sister has already mastered her new admirers' names.

She has risen to her feet again—Professor Forth's wife—the stern-faced beauty whom in their walks and talks the boys have often with distant awe admired.

"I am sure," she says, with a sweet cold smile, "that if you care to try our small ground, I shall be very——"

She is a tall woman, and her eyes are on a level with Bellairs'. She can, therefore, easily look over his shoulder. What sight is it so seen that makes her stop suddenly in mid-speech, with a catch in her breath? The pause is but short. Almost before her auditors have had time to notice the hiatus, it is filled up.

"I shall be very happy to see you any day you choose to come—to-morrow, any day!"

Her words are perfectly collected; but

surely she is far, far paler than she was when she began to speak; and though her sentences are addressed to the young men, her eyes are wandering oddly beyond them.

"Upon my soul, I believe the woman is off her head!" Stanley says confidentially to Bellairs, as they walk home together in the moonlight. "Did you notice her eyes when she was talking to us? they made me feel quite jumpy!"

"Off her head!" growls Bellairs, who finds it not impossible to combine a poignant interest in Sarah with a servile moth-and-candle-like homage to the elder and severer beauty; "so would you be, if you were married to an old mummy!"

CHAPTER III.

AND what was it Mrs. Forth saw over Bellairs' shoulder? What is the sight that, now that the temporary call upon her attention is withdrawn, is riveting into such an agony of search the lovely cold eyes, to which so few things seem worth looking at? Fortunately for her, a new batch of undergraduates has hurried up to be presented to Sarah. Never since the days of Dresden and the German army has Miss Churchill had her hands so full. Belinda is free to send her gaze unnoticed round the hall, in a silent, breathless, passionate quest. Quest of what? She does not ask herself how much the better off she will be if she

succeeds in finding the object of that quest. To find it! to find it! Come what may of the finding, to find it! Most people would feel sure that she has been deceived by an accidental resemblance to Rivers in some stranger; men of his size, complexion and bearing being, though unhappily in a minority, yet still numerous among two thousand youths of the English upper classes. But Belinda would laugh to scorn the suggestion that at any distance, or in any glimpse however momentary, she could have mistaken any other for him.

There exists in her mind no smallest doubt that the face seen in that one lightning-flash, and then instantly hidden by twenty other intervening faces, was his—his or his angel's! Perhaps he is dead, and that he has come to tell her. A mute sob rises in her throat. Whether in the spirit or the body, she must find him! At intervals of every few minutes she is interrupted in her search by the greetings and observations of passing acquaintances. She answers them politely and connectedly, but

with a brevity that does not encourage a prolongation of their civilities; a brevity that will the sooner leave her free.

The room is thinner than it was, or rather the crowd is distributed more evenly over its whole area. Since the supper-tables sprang into sight — even loyalty giving the *pas* to hunger; the uncertain hope of a bow from the Duke, to the sober certainty of lobster-salad — the packing about H.R.H. is less dense. The guests are extended along the line of tables. Of Sarah, indeed, scarcely a vestige is to be seen, so closely is she hedged in by a wall of boys. At something she has just said they all laugh rapturously; those who did not hear it—so firmly assured already in her character as a wit—as well as those who did.

The signalman's biographer has descended from his *estrade*, and is talking as commonplacely to his hostess as if he wotted nothing of parental agonies or points, and as if the rosy babe had been sent to bed with the whipping it deserved.

Through the slackening of the press it has surely become easier for one seeking to discover the person sought; and yet for a while she seeks in vain. How many heads there are! heads bald as Cæsar's; heads thickly clad as Absolom's; heads white, heads brown; sandy heads, pepper and salt heads, gold heads; long heads, round heads, knobby heads! And how they shift and move! Will they never stay quiet for a moment? And among them all he is not! He must have gone—gone without ever conjecturing her nearness!

Again that mute sob rises chokingly. Why should he not be gone? Why should she wish that he were not gone? Why should she wish to see him? What has she to say to him when they meet? But she pushes roughly aside Reason's cool pleading. *Why* does she wish it? *Why*—*why?* There may be no *why*, but she *does* wish it; wishes it with such a compelling frenzy of wishing, as seems as if it must produce the fulfilment of that wish. And it does. Its might prevails. Ah—h—h!

For in a moment she has seen him again. He is nearer now; so near as to be recognizable past mistake or misgiving, even by eyes less acquainted than hers with every trick of lip and brow. If he continues to advance in the direction at present taken by his steps, it is impossible but that in one minute or less—in perhaps fifty seconds, perhaps forty—she will come within the range of his vision. He will be aware of her as she is aware of him.

"Are you ready to go home?" says a voice at her elbow.

She turns suddenly; eyes alight, and heart madly bounding, to find her husband at her elbow. The revulsion is so hideous that speech wholly fails her.

"I should be obliged if you would tell me where I am likely to find your sister," he continues, taking her silence for assent, since she is never very prodigal of her words to him; "so that I may let her know that we are going."

But at that she finds voice.

"*Going!*" she says, flashing one look of

passionate dissent at him. "Why should we go? Impossible!"

"I see no impossibility," he answers captiously; "we have already amply satisfied the claims of civility. The impossibility, as you are perfectly aware, lies in combining such late hours with early rising in the morning."

"Then why should you rise early?" answers she, with tremulous rebellion, "It is no use talking—I cannot come away. You forget Sarah; it—it would not be fair upon Sarah; I have neither the wish nor the right to spoil her enjoyment."

"I should imagine that nothing would be easier than to find a chaperon in whose charge to leave her," rejoins he persistently; "if indeed," with a slightly venomous look in the direction of his sister-in-law, "she considers one necessary."

But Belinda only observes a silence which he divines to be mutinous. He is accustomed in her to sullen compliance, uncheerful acquiescence, loth obedience; but to open revolt he is not accustomed,

and, on the spur of the moment, and in so public a place, he is not prepared to deal with it.

"Since you manifest such an avidity in the pursuit of pleasure," he says resentfully, "I will indulge you with another half-hour, at the end of which time I must beg that you and your sister will be prepared to accompany me without further remonstrance."

He does not await the answer, which perhaps he knows he would not receive; but turns on his heel and leaves her—leaves her free to pursue that feverish search which his coming had so rudely interrupted.

It is some moments before she again finds the object of that search; moments long enough for her to tell herself in heart bitterness that she has pushed against her fate in vain. But then, all in a moment, she has found him again. He is further off, indeed, than he was: some trifle must have diverted his steps from the direction then pursued by them; and he is still, in

his unconsciousness, slowly widening the distance between them.

Is it possible that he is tending towards the door? that she, unable by word or sign to arrest him, will see him go? Oh, but life is a hard thing! Knowing as she does that at one lightest cry from her he would turn; to be no more able to utter that cry than if a real material gag were choking her utterances! Can it be, then, that her soul's cry has reached his soul's ears? for he does turn suddenly and smiling. Has he seen her, that he smiles? Ah no! Would he indeed smile if he saw her? She has not given him much cause to smile at the sight of her. Well, he is wise. He has again averted his look. And the half-hour, the inexorable half-hour is passing! How much of it has already gone? Ten minutes, at least, must by this time have passed.

There are only twenty minutes for hope to work upon. Twenty minutes!—and then the close fly, the Early English Villa, Professor Forth, and the Fragments of

Menander! To the end of time Professor Forth, and the Fragments of Menander!

Again her thoughts are broken in upon by a voice — Sarah's this time; Sarah having shaken herself free of her disciples; Sarah with a solicitous look and an anxious eye.

"I think it best to tell you," she says hurriedly, and narrowly watching the effect of her words upon her sister's face; "I was afraid lest you might hear it suddenly from some one else—some stranger. I suppose you have not seen him yet, but *he* is here!"

"I know it," answers Belinda shortly, and very low.

"You—you are not going to faint?"

"*Faint!* why should I faint?" with an accent of intense impatience, her eyes still riveted on the now again approaching figure; "do I ever faint?"

"Would you like to go home?"

"Go home!" echoes Belinda, in an accent of fierce desperation; "why do you all

sing the same song? why are you all determined that I must go home?"

"I thought you would wish it," replies Sarah anxiously. "I should if I were in your place. Do not you think it would be better?"

But she speaks to deaf ears. Her eyes, still fastened on her sister's face, see that face's lilies suddenly dyed with a most happy and loveliest flush.

The sun has risen: he has touched the sunless snow on the Jungfrau's crest, and all the world is rosy red. So then he has seen her!. There is now no longer any fear of his departing unintentionally ignorant of her neighbourhood.

There is indeed time for one short pang of alarm lest he should do what in her heart she knows if he were wise he would do—and who knows how much of wisdom these two years may have lent him?—turn away, and knowingly avoid her! But apparently he is not wise.

In a moment he has pierced the small portion of crowd that still separates them;

pierced it with a goodwill that would not have disgraced Miss Watson. She has one instant of such blissful anticipation—only a thousandfold intensified—as used to be hers in the Lüttichau Strasse, at the sound of Tommy's childish foot pattering up the stone stairs, and her love's firm and eager tread behind it.

The next moment they have met. Their unfamiliar right hands lie in one another; and they say—nothing. Of what use to have mesmerized him hither by her eyes, and the insanity of her voiceless prayers, if she have nothing to say to him now that he has come? But happily, though she and he are speechless, Sarah is not.

"So it is you, is it?" she says in a dry voice. "Now what eccentric wind has blown you here?"

He does not answer at once. Evidently, as of old, he has forgotten her presence.

"I see that you still have your old trick of not answering me," pursues she, running quickly on with a flightiness that conceals a good deal of real nervousness; "but

never mind: there 'are places where I also am admired,' as Goldsmith said. Belinda, do you know that twenty-five young gentlemen of different colleges are going to be so good as to call upon you between the hours of three and seven to-morrow?"

Belinda is struggling to rouse herself out of her intoxication; already so far unintoxicated as to know that it *is* intoxication.

"Are they?" she says, with a weakly laugh; "I am sure that I am very much obliged to them."

"And meanwhile what has brought *you* here?" asks Sarah persistently, carrying on her determined talk as a shield to her sister's emotion.

Her speech has the effect of making Rivers, too, put down the wine-cup; of bringing him also back to the bald, sober, morning prose of life.

"I have come to take my degree," he answers; "I have been prevented by—by circumstances from taking it before."

So now she has heard his voice! To

have touched his hand; to have met his eye; to have heard his speech! Is not this to have had her wish? Surely now she is content. Surely now she will go home at ease and satisfied. But who was ever satisfied with *one* wish? What wish ever died barren, without engendering a hundred more?

"The half-hour is expired!" says a voice.

The Dresden quartette is complete. Perhaps it is this thought that, rushing simultaneously into three out of the four minds, strikes them momentarily mute. Sarah is, of course, the first to recover herself.

"What a mysterious utterance!" she says, with rather a forced gaiety; "*what* half-hour? any particular half-hour? You remember Mr. Rivers, do not you? Mr. Rivers, you know Mr. Forth, my—my brother-in-law?"

There is a slight unintentional hesitation before pronouncing, and a perhaps intentional slight stress in pronouncing, the last word. Rivers has stepped back a pace or

two, isolating himself from the augmented group; but at this summons he again advances, and, except by the two signs of a sheet-white face and set teeth, is not to be distinguished from any other well-mannered young man making a bow. But the Professor would be slow indeed to mark the hue of any undergraduate's, or ex-undergraduate's face, or to note whether his mouth were open or shut.

"The fly is waiting," he says, returning Rivers's salutation with cursory indifference. "Belinda, I must beg you to accompany me at once, and not keep it waiting."

As he speaks, he looks at his wife, as one expecting and braced for fresh rebellion. But he meets with none.

"Come along!" cries Sarah with alacrity; "we are quite ready, are not we, Belinda? Enough is as good as a feast; and we have supped full of pleasure. Good-bye!" nodding with cool friendliness over her shoulder, and taking her sister's hand.

Belinda offers no resistance; flaccidly she complies, and without one look at

Rivers, with only a faint bend of her head in his direction, begins to follow the Professor of Etruscan out of the room. Rivers stands stupidly looking after them. The tart imperativeness of her husband's tone; his employment of her Christian name; her own dull docility—which of these is it that makes him feel as if some one had given him a great blow over the head with a club? Presently he begins, mechanically and purposelessly, to follow them.

The crowd is thick at the entrance and on the stone stairs—the departing crowd. The quadrangle is full of vehicles. Footmen are few in Oxbridge; but such as there are, are shouting their mistresses' carriages: the humbler multitude are pushing, asking, struggling for their flies. Lucky ones are finding them and driving off: unlucky ones are vainly striving to identify horse or driver. Among the latter are the Forths. In coming out, they have been parted by the press—that is to say, the sisters have lost each other—the younger loitering in injudicious dalliance with some

of her new sweethearts; the elder plodding on in dull and woolly oblivion of all but the iron necessity of following that cap and gown ahead of her.

It is not till the elusive fly is at length found—till her foot is on the step, and Professor Forth is sharply urging her in by the elbow from behind, that she becomes aware of having mislaid her junior.

"Get in—get in!" cries he crossly; "what are you waiting for?"

"But Sarah!" she says, awaking from her unconsciousness and looking hastily round; "what has become of Sarah? we cannot go without Sarah!"

He makes an irritated gesture.

"No doubt she has joined some other party; no doubt she will do very well: at all events, in this confusion it is impossible to attempt to find her!"

"It is much more impossible to go without her!" replies she firmly, withdrawing her foot from the step; "I wonder that you should propose such a thing!"

"She is perfectly well able to take care

of herself!" retorts he, recurring to his old and spiteful formula; "she will find her own way home!"

"Then I will find *my* own way home, too!" answers she indignantly, and resolutely turning her back upon him and the open fly-door. She is too indignant even to deign to observe whether he takes her at her word.

The crowd is still issuing, issuing; crossing the moonlit square on foot; nodding good-night out of carriage windows; away they go! She retraces her steps to the stair-foot. It is not pleasant work pushing against a human tide; and so she finds. It is bewildering to be staring into every face; peering under all the hoods and mufflers. And among all the faces, under all the hoods and mufflers, is no Sarah to be found. It is obvious that the Professor is right. She has found her own way home.

The company is melting away so rapidly that, unless she wishes to be shut into the college for the night, she must needs follow

her example. Well! there is no great hardship in that! She is in the mood when the abnormal, the unusual, seems more tolerable to her than the accustomed, the everyday. Half an hour of solitude and midnight! Half an hour in which to be Belinda only—not Belinda Forth at all! Half an hour in which to reckon with this night and its work! She has already made half a dozen steps along the stone flags of the quadrangle, when some one comes up behind her. Had she known that he would come up behind her, that she makes no sign of surprise, nor any pause in her walk?

"You are alone?" he says with agitation.

"It seems so," she answers. It is the same dry voice with which she had so often galled and chilled him at Dresden.

"You have lost your—your party?"

"I have lost Sarah."

"And your—and Professor Forth?"

"He could not wait, and I could not go without Sarah."

"And he has left you behind—*alone?*"

She is silent, still speeding along in the moonlight.

"And how do you propose to get home?" he asks, keeping up with and determinately addressing her.

"I am getting home as fast as I can."

"You mean to walk?"

"It looks like it."

Her tone is brusque and dogged; but if she hopes by its means to rid herself of her companion she is mistaken.

"In evening dress?"

"Pooh!" she says, with a hard laugh; "we are not so fastidious here, *nous autres;* I walk out to dinner every night of my life!"

"But not alone?"

Her face darkens. "No, not alone."

They have reached the gateway and Wren's domey tower. She has stopped in her resolute walk; but in the stopping there is as much resolution as there was in the hurrying.

"Here we part," she says shortly; "good-night!"

"You must allow me to see you home," he answers firmly.

"I have already told you that it is absolutely unnecessary," retorts she roughly.

There is an instant's interval before his rejoinder. They are putting out the lights in the hall; the great building is greedily devouring half the moonlight in the quad, with its raven shadow. It has embraced the fountain in the middle. It is not much of a fountain, but how pleasantly its little voice pierces through the noise of rolling wheels and human shoutings. For how many centuries could she gladly stand here listening to it!

"You *must* allow me!" with perfect respect, but obstinately.

"I *must not!*" Is the night-wind heady, like wine? Her tone changes to one that is almost entreaty. "I had rather you did not; I *ask* you not!"

Her incivilities had left him iron; to her pleading he is as wax.

"It shall be as you wish," he says, gravely bowing.

There is nothing now to detain her, and yet she lingers an instant, as though expecting him to say something more. But he adds nothing. She turns out of the gateway and into the street, and walks fast and steadily up it. There are not many towns through which it would be judicious for a young and solitary woman to take her way, bare-headed and in flimsy ball-gown, at midnight; but about Oxbridge, Una, without her lion, might have strayed unassailed from sunset to sunrise. Involuntarily she slackens her speed a little, from the almost run with which she had begun her course, though still keeping at a moderately rapid walk. What cause is there for hurry? There is nothing now to hasten from; and Heaven knows there is nothing to hasten to!

She did well to be peremptory; but, after all, he was not very much in earnest; he did not press the point. It is much better that it should be so; but still, as a mere matter-of-fact, he did not. She looks up at the sky, which is spreading out the jewels

it has kept hidden through the staring day, spreading them out for

"The fair city with her dreaming spires,"

to look up at and admire; all its bright belts and bears; its gods and goddesses. Then she looks suddenly round. There are still a good many people about, but no undergraduates; for the University mother has gathered her curled darlings to her bosom for the night.

The man, then, who is keeping pace with her, footstep for footstep, twenty yards behind, is no undergraduate. She redoubles her speed again. Pooh! his presence has no reference to her. He is only taking the natural road to his hotel. But she does not look round again until the more bustling streets lie behind her; until she has reached the broad still thoroughfare where a range of grey colleges and a row of sentinel elms hold quiet converse with the stars.

Then, as if the muscles of her neck had been moved by some one else, she not

consenting, once again she turns her head. The hotels are long passed. If he is still following, it is she whom he is following. And lo! twenty yards behind her, there he is, stepping through the moonlight!

She gives a low, excited laugh. Well, they have both had their will then: he has not walked home with her; she has not walked home alone. It is a compromise. Again she looks up to the heavens. What a lovely, lovely vault! What seed-pearl of constellations! What great planet-diamonds!

The clocks have just begun to strike midnight; the city's innumerous clocks, cathedral, college, church; the booming bell, the sharp strike, the melodious chime! How nobly their loud wedded harmony floods the night! And is there one of the gardens—she has reached the suburb of villas and gardens by this time—that has not contributed the breath of its gillyflowers to make the boon air so sweet?

She walks on with her strong elastic tread. After all, it is good to be young:

to have a fine ear for sound; a nostril sensitive to fragrance; and—the consciousness that behind you there is one protecting you where there is nothing to be protected from —guarding you where there is nothing to be guarded against.

She has reached her own gate, and at it halts, her hand upon the latch. Here surely, under the ægis of her own roof-tree —here, where that twinkling night-light shows the exact spot where her husband is addressing himself to his slumbers—she may abate a little of her rigidity.

Seeing her arrived, he too has halted; nor is it until by a faint motion of her hand she gives him leave to approach, that he ventures to draw near her.

"Thank you!" she says with a smile, to which it is perhaps the moonlight that lends its quivering uncertainty; "but it was not necessary."

He neither disclaims nor accepts her acknowledgments. Gravely he unfastens the iron gate for her; while above his gold head the laburnum droops her gold

curls. The moon has taken their colour out of both, and substituted her own. Is he then still going to say nothing? But as she passes through, he speaks:

"I—I—am not leaving Oxbridge to-morrow. I shall be in Oxbridge all to-morrow."

"Shall you?" she says faintly.

"I have not done anything to forfeit your friendship, have I?" he asks, while in the moonlight she sees his right hand tighten its nervous clasp on one of the spiked iron uprights of the gate.

She is quite silent.

"Have I?" he repeats, in a tone as of one who, though patient, will not go without his answer. (Is truth always the best to be spoken? Then let it be spoken!)

"Nothing!"

"Is there then any reason why I should not come and see you to-morrow?"

Silence again; her look wandering undecidedly over her flower-bed.

"Is there?"

Her eye has caught the Professor's night-light again—that ill-favoured Jack-o'-Lantern that is to dance for ever across the morass of her life.

"None!" she answers firmly; and with that firm "None!" she leaves him.

CHAPTER IV.

"HE was not far wrong," says Sarah dispassionately, "though I am afraid that it was scarcely in a brotherly spirit that he said it; I *am* eminently well able to take care of myself!"

It is next morning, and the girls are beginning the day with a preliminary saunter round the narrow bounds of the little garden, and the newly-mown tennis-ground. They are very small bounds, but within them is room for undried dew; for a blackbird with a voice a hundred times bigger than its body; for a guelder rose, a fine broom-bush, and a short-lived lilac. What more would you have? Beneath

one Turkey-red sunshade they stroll in slow contentment along.

"I have no foolish false pride," continues Sarah complacently. "When I realized that I was left behind, I saw that the only thing to be done was to make some one give me a lift home. They did not much like it at first, but they were very glad afterwards, when they found that they had 'entertained an angel unawares!'"

"And how did they find out that they had?" asks Belinda drily.

"They were delighted with my conversation," rejoins the other importantly. "I could not have done it if you had been by," breaking into a laugh; "but I talked about the Higher Education of Women!"

Belinda joins in the laugh; nor is there any evidence of her mirth being less spontaneous and bubbling than her sister's. Ahead of them the little dogs are frisking. At least, to speak more correctly, Punch is. What little frisk time and fat have left to Slutty has been stamped out of her by mortification at Punch's reappearance on

the scene. When you are no longer in your first youth, there is really not much amusement in having one of your hind-legs continually pulled, mouthed, and facetiously worried from behind.

"And you," says Sarah, standing on tip-toe to reach a lilac bough, and rub her face luxuriously against it; "how did *you* get home?"

A red sunshade always diffuses a glow over the face beneath it.

"Oh, I walked," with an assumption of inattention.

"Alone?"

There is a second's hesitation before the answer comes. Belinda is naturally veracious; but, after all, there is nothing incompatible with literal veracity in answering:

"Yes, alone."

"Were not you frightened?" asks Sarah.

Her tone is careless; but she has loosed the lilac bough, and her shrewd eyes are—perhaps accidentally—bent upon her sister's.

"Frightened!" repeats Belinda, with an impatience that seems out of proportion to

the occasion, eagerly following her junior's example, and thrusting her hot cheeks among the cool and sugared lilac-clusters; "what a silly question! Why should I be frightened? what was there to be frightened at?"

But to this heated inquiry Sarah makes no answer; a reticence which causes a feverish misgiving to dart across Belinda's mind. But no! her sister's room looks towards the back. Sarah has an eye like a greyhound, an ear like a stag, and a nose like a truffle dog, but even she cannot see and hear through deal boards.

"I must leave you to your own devices this morning," she says, changing the subject with some precipitation; "you must amuse yourself as well as you can till luncheon-time."

Sarah lifts her eyebrows. "Do you mean to say that you intend to take three hours in ordering dinner?"

"Ordering dinner!" echoes the other ironically; "ordering dinner indeed! Did you ever happen to hear of Menander?"

"Never."

"Nor of his Fragments?"

"Never."

"Nor of his Notes, Philological, Critical, and Archæological?"

"Never."

"Happy you!" says Belinda drily, beginning to walk towards the house.

"If I were you," cries Sarah irreverently, calling after her, "he should be in still smaller 'fragments' before I had done with him!"

Belinda laughs.

"Bah!" she says; "it is all in the day's work. Perhaps it is better to have too much to do, like me, than too little, like you."

There is such a strong tincture of cheerfulness in the tone with which she speaks, it differs so widely from the dogged submission of yesterday, that Sarah eyes her suspiciously.

"You take a rosy view of life this morning," she says, with a streak of sarcasm.

Belinda changes colour.

"It is a matter of weather," she says quickly. "I am very much influenced by weather; you know that you always used to say that I was a Weatherglass!"

But is it a matter of weather? Is it the weather that sends her humming with irresistible gaiety to her desk and Menander? Spring-time, it is true, is exhilarating; morning is exhilarating; life's morning is exhilarating: why, then, should she not be exhilarated? But is it of these three innocent stimulants only that she is drinking? There must be something different from her wont in the very quality of her step as she enters her husband's study, for he looks up.

"You are late," he says briefly.

"Only three minutes," she answers pleasantly; "and I will make it up at the other end."

She seats herself at her escritoire, forcibly and with difficulty swallowing down the end of the tune that she has been singing to herself, under her breath, all the way upstairs. Even the very room—the hated

task-work room—looks different from what it ordinarily does. Usually it is quite sunless; but this morning a long, slant dart of gold has squeezed itself in, taking no denial, and on it how the dust-motes are dancing! Must everything dance to-day?

The Professor, at least, is an exception to the general rule. He shows no signs of any wish to dance. While dictating, he is in the habit of walking up and down. She knows the exact square in the carpet from which he will start, and that at which he will pause and turn. He has begun his diurnal course; but there is a moment's interval before the first words of the first sentence leave his lips.

She pauses, pen in hand, awaiting them; and as she pauses, following him with her eyes, a feeling of genuine and potent compassion passes through her heart and brain.

"How dreadful to be old! How hideous to be ugly, cantankerous, unloved!"

"I think," she says, under this impulse, speaking in a gentle, hesitating voice,

"that I owe you an apology for my rude speech about you to Sarah, after dinner yesterday. I dare say," laughing nervously, "that you have forgotten it. I am sure it was not worth remembering; but, at all events, it makes me easier in my mind to tell you that I regret it."

The intention of this speech is excellent; as a mere question of judgment and tact, it is doubtful whether it had not been wiser to have let her stinging jest lie, without resuscitating it even to repent of it.

The expression of his face shows whether or no he has forgotten it.

"I think," he says aridly, "that since we are already late, we had better keep to the subject in hand."

For a moment or two she bows her crimsoned face and bitten lips over her desk, in furious annoyance at having laid herself open to this self-inflicted humiliation. But, ere long, her serenity returns. It is only wounds inflicted by those we love whose sting lasts.

After all, she has done her part; she

has made the *amende.* Of what least consequence is it how he has taken it? But her compassion is dead. He may look as old, as pinched, as bloodless as he chooses. No smallest throb of pity stirs her heart again; nor does any other word, unrelating to the subject of her labour, cross her lips.

Through all the fresh bright morning hours, he travels from his one carpet-square to his other carpet-square, elaborating careful, classic phrases as he goes; and she, in docile silence, follows him with her pen.

The sun soars high; the drowsy flies inside the shut window make their futile journeys up and down the pane. The swallows sweep across outside, bells ring, butchers and bakers drive up and drive away; but not one of these distracting objects does she allow to beguile her for one instant of her toil. She will do her task-work conscientiously, thoroughly, wholly, so that hereafter neither he nor she herself may have anything to reproach her with; and then, when it is ended

—she allows herself one long breath of prospective enjoyment—why then the sun will still be high; the swallows will still be darting; the lengthy May afternoon, with probabilities too bright to be faced in its green lap, will still be hers.

And, meanwhile, how well the pens write! how clear her own apprehension seems! She has even suggested a verbal emendation or two, which his nice ear has accepted. How quickly the morning is passing! Can it indeed be a quarter to one that the College clocks are striking? After all, there is no great hardship in being amanuensis to a savan afflicted with weak eyes; it is a great matter to be able to be of use to some one!

She looks up, smiling rosily; if not forgetful, forgiving, of her former snub.

"We have done a good day's work!" she says congratulatingly. "You have been in vein this morning."

"It is fortunate if it is so," replies he grudgingly, "for we have large arrears of work to make up."

"Have we?" she says, a little blankly, rubbing her cramped right finger and thumb; "but—but not *to-day?*"

"And why not to-day?" rejoins he firmly. "I have promised that my 'Essay upon the Law of Entail among the Athenians' shall be in the printers' hands by to-morrow, and it is therefore necessary that the proofs should be corrected before post-time to-day."

"Not to-day!" cries she feverishly; "not to-day!"

The smile and the short-lived roses have together left her face. She looks fagged and harried, but obstinate.

"And why not to-day?" repeats he, regarding her with slow displeasure.

"You forget," she says,—"you seem to forget that we have a guest."

"She will, no doubt, provide herself with amusement," replies he disagreeably; "she will, no doubt, amuse herself perfectly without your aid."

"And I?" she says in a low voice, turning very white, and looking at him with

concentrated dislike (is it possible that she could ever have pitied him ?) "how am *I* to amuse myself ? does it never occur to you that I, too, may wish to be amused ?"

"I put no impediment in your way," he answers frostily; "you are at liberty—with the exception of the hours during which I am compelled to claim your services—to choose your own pursuits, your own associates !"

"Am I ?" she says, hastily catching him up, while the dismissed carnation colour pours in flood back into her cheeks again. "You give me leave ?"

He looks at her with such unfeigned and unadmiring astonishment in his cold eyes, that she turns away in confusion.

"How long will you want me for ?" she asks faltering; "how many hours will the correcting of these proofs take ?"

"It is impossible to say, exactly," replies he, tranquilly leaving the room; satisfied with her acquiescence, and indifferent as to the spirit in which that acquiescence has been given.

The afternoon is three hours old, and Belinda still sits at her desk. The dew is dried, the long sunbeam has stolen away, but though it does not cheer her by its visible presence, she is aware, by the augmented heat of the close room, that the sun is beating hard and hotly on roof and wall. And on these thinly-built houses it *does* beat very hotly. At her side lies a heap of corrected slips, but before her is piled another, scarcely less bulky. She has been at work upon them for an hour and a half, and still she sees no end to her toil. Her head aches with long stooping; she has inked her tired fingers, and her eyes are dull and dogged. Now and again the door-bell ringing makes her give a nervous start. Is it come again—that time of strained continuous listening? those twenty-one months, during which all her life-power seemed to have passed into her ears?

It is the hour when visitors may be with the most probability expected. But is there not also a probability that they may

be sent away again? Sometimes, when harder worked or gloomier-spirited than usual, she has bidden her servant deny her. Is it not but too possible that, seeing her close slavery of to-day, that servant may take upon herself to conclude that such is her mistress's wish now also.

The idea throws her into a fever. She does not listen. She makes an unaccountable mistake. Again the bell rings. Is it her fancy, or has this ring a different sound from the former ones? Is there in it a mixture of violence and timidity, as of a person who had had to screw up his courage to ring at all in the first instance, and had then overdone it?

She writes on mechanically, dully aware that her husband is rebuking her for the illegibility of her last words. Even if the moral blows he is giving her were physical ones, she would feel them none the more.

The door opens, and the servant enters, with a man's card upon a salver. She scarcely needs to glance at it to tell that

it is HIS; but for a moment her pale lips cannot frame the question that has sprung to them: "Has he been sent away?"

"Is he gone?" she asks, stammering, taking the card, and, with a senseless, involuntary movement, hiding it in her hand.

"I told him that you were engaged, ma'am," replies the maid apologetically; "but he asked me to bring you this card. Shall I say that you are engaged, ma'am?"

The Professor looks up, cross at the interruption, to give a brief "Yes;" but his wife strikes athwart him.

"Show him in," she says, with precipitate decision. "Say that I will be down directly; tell Miss Churchill."

She takes up her quill again, as the servant leaves the room, but apparently her hand shakes to a degree that is beyond her control; for in a moment a great blot has defaced the printed page.

"Pray, be careful!" cries her husband

fretfully. "You have a hair in your pen."

She throws it down, and takes another. The room in which they are sitting is over the drawing-room. Evidently *he* has been ushered in, and Sarah has joined him; for there is a murmur of voices. What are they saying? What are they likely to be saying?

"You have spelt *allegorical* with one *l*!" says the Professor, in a voice of resentful wonder.

"Have I?" she answers, bewildered and inattentive. "And how many ought it to have?"

The voices have grown more distinctly audible. They have left the drawing-room; it is obvious that Sarah is taking him out into the garden—the pleasant, little, cool garden, with its blackbird and its broom-bush, and its bees. She draws a hot, long, envious breath at the thought.

"A child of five years old would have been ashamed to perpetrate so gross a

blunder!" resumes he, taking the sheet from before her, and indignantly holding it up for reprobation.

She heaves a heavy, furious sigh, and a sombre light comes into her great, gloomy eyes. From the garden is heard a peal of laughter. Sarah is always laughing. It is well to be merry sometimes, but Sarah is too much of a buffoon.

"In errors so palpable, it is difficult not to see intention," continues he, exasperated by a silence that is so plainly not repentance—a silence which she still observes.

Another burst of laughter from the garden—not Sarah's this time; a man's wholesome, unfeigned mirth. *He*, too, can laugh, can he?

"I should really be disposed to recommend a return to the writing-master," says Mr. Forth, still ironically regarding the blurred page.

For all answer, she rises to her feet, and throws her pen with violence down upon the floor.

"Your machine has broken down for to-

day," she says, with a pale, rebellious smile. "Legible or illegible, writing-master or no writing-master, I will write not one word more to-day!"

CHAPTER V.

IT is Miss Churchill's maxim always to make herself as comfortable, under any given circumstances, as those circumstances will permit; nor has she failed on the present occasion to live up to her own precept. Beneath the garden wall, where the shade spreads coolest, a fur rug, filched from the drawing-room floor, is extended; cushions, unlawfully thieved from the drawing-room sofa, mollify the hardness of back of the garden-chairs. Upon the unlikely hypothesis of her conversation running short, she has unearthed all the novels she can find. At her feet the dogs alternately sleep, and gnash their teeth—rarely successful—at the flies. In

the sun, close by, stands the parrot's gilded cage; so that, if other resources fail her, she may fall back upon his loquacity. In addition to the dogs, at her feet also lies Rivers, unworthily occupied in tickling the inside of the dozing Slutty's ear with a flower-stalk. This is the tranquil Arcadian picture that salutes Mrs. Forth's eyes as she issues from the house. He has his back turned towards her! He has not cared enough for her coming, even to place himself so as to watch for it! How is she to know that it was only a moment ago, in obedience to Sarah's orders, and in dread of the remembered penetration of her eyes, that he had adopted his present position? How cool they look! How much at ease! What a pity to disturb them! After all she might as well have finished the proofs. As she draws near them, walking so softly over the turf that they are not immediately aware of her, a new burst of laughter fills and grates upon her ears.

"You seem very merry," she says drily.

Sarah exhibits no surprise—as why in-

deed should she?—at her sister's advent. With her head thrown back comfortably over her chair, she finishes her laugh luxuriously out, but of Rivers' mirth Belinda need no longer complain. There is not much that could be called mirth in the face that—suddenly leaping to his feet—he turns towards her. What a death's-head she must be to work such an instantaneous transformation in him!

"You seem to be very merry," she repeats.

She is conscious of the resentful dryness of her tone; of the fagged flush upon her cheeks; and the sullenness that she has not quite been able to banish from her eyes; but she is as powerless to correct the one as the others. What has he done to deserve that tone? Beneath it he stands tongue-tied.

"May not I know what your joke was?" she says, struggling not very successfully for a greater amenity of manner; "why should not it amuse me, too?"

"It—it was nothing much!" he answers deprecatingly; "I do not know why I

laughed; it was only"—looking unhappy and ashamed—"that Miss Churchill was telling me that Punch had once been engaged to the parrot, and that it was broken off because she bit his tail to the bone!"

There is such a contrast between the very mild waggery of this anecdote, and the deep humiliation of the tone in which he narrates it, that Sarah sets off laughing helplessly again; but not a muscle of Belinda's face moves.

"That respectable old jest," she says, with a slight shrug; "it has been for many years a family Joe Miller!"

"It was not a Joe Miller to him!" replies Sarah, standing up in indistinct defence—indistinct through much laughing—of her pleasantry; "he may pretend now that he did not like it—but he did!"

Belinda sits down; but the cloud still lowers on her brow. To her own heart she says that she does well to be angry. That here, for the first time face to face with the tragedy of their two lives, he should be in a condition to be genuinely

amused by so miserable a jest—by any jest! Nor does the crushing of his merriment please her any better. She, then, is the wet blanket who stifles his jollity. Times are indeed changed! If she were to leave them, no doubt the peals of laughter would at once break out afresh. But for the present they are effectually stilled. Painfully and sorely conscious of this, she makes another difficult effort to recover her good temper.

"I think I am losing my sense of humour," she says awkwardly; "it must be the effect of Oxbridge air. Punch, will you, too, lose your sense of humour?"

She has lifted the lively little dog up on her knees, and is half hiding her hot face against his.

"He is losing something else, is not he?" says Rivers, made bold by her gentler tone diffidently to draw a little nigher to her, and to raise his eyes in painful questioning to hers.

As he speaks, he lifts his hand and touches the locket habitually worn round

the neck, and as habitually tried to be scratched off by Punch; and from which a lock of hair is at present obviously escaping.

"Why, Punch, do *you* wear locks of hair?" asks the young man, laughing nervously. "Whose is it? Slutty's, let us hope!"

"It is always coming out," interposes Sarah in a disgusted voice; "the fact is," lazily drawing herself up into a sitting posture, and looking round explanatorily, "that people have a way of giving me locks of their hair—I am sure I do not know why—and as I cannot possibly wear them all, Punch is good enough to wear some of them for me! Punch has worn a great deal of hair in his day, have not you, Punch?"

As she speaks, she calls the dog to her; and becomes absorbed in the contemplation of his jewellery.

"Is it German or English hair, should you think?" asks Rivers, almost under his breath.

There is a smile on his face as he puts this question; but a smile with whose mirth she need not quarrel. In a moment how the Hussars and Uhlans are clanking round her again! How the soft wind is pelting her with cherry flowers! How the old Schloss is towering up against the German sky! She cannot answer him; but those few words seem to have given them back something of their former intimacy.

"Now whose is it?" says Sarah reflectively, having taken out the little lock, and being now contemplatively eyeing it with her head on one side; "what a memory I have! Belinda, can you help me? whose is this lock of hair of Punch's? Oh, but it must have been since your day; it is not unlike *yours*" (turning to Rivers, and coolly setting the little tendril against his hair to compare them). "Did you ever give me a lock of your hair?"

He turns with a start. He has been unwisely allowing himself to drift into one of his old speculations, as to whether

any woman's ear had ever sat so daintily close to her head as does that of the wife of Professor Forth.

"A lock of my hair!" he cries, jumping up, and falling on his knees before Sarah, with an air of exaggerated playfulness, "if I have not, I am quite ready to supply the omission; whereabouts will you have it from?" passing his hand over his own crisp curls. "May I take your scissors, Mrs. Forth?"

It is the first time that he has so addressed her. It is with untold difficulty that the name crosses his lips, and consequently he enunciates it with unusual distinctness. It is in reality a cudgelling that he is administering to himself for his late lapse, but to her it seems a wanton cruelty.

"May I take your scissors, Mrs. Forth?"

Mrs. Forth's head is, however, bent so low over her work-basket, that apparently she does not hear. Behind the shelter of that convenient receptacle for tapes and

needles, her hands are trembling and writhing. At Dresden would he have talked even in joke of giving Sarah a lock of his hair? Why, he never even heard her when she spoke to him! Happily for Belinda, at this point, she is summoned to the house on some trifling errand, which detains her for ten minutes—ten minutes in which she is able to resume some hold upon herself; and it is well that it is so, for the sight which greets her is one not calculated to promote her equanimity. Sarah has abandoned her lazy reclining, and is sitting up, and holding Rivers' hand; not indeed, when one comes to observe closely, in any very lover-like manner, but as one who is examining it with an air of the liveliest interest and curiosity.

"I should be ashamed to own such a hand," she is saying, with her accustomed candour; "it is like a workman's hand."

"But I *am* a workman," he answers bluntly.

And then he is suddenly aware of Belinda's presence, and snatches it away.

"It really is quite a curiosity in its way," says Sarah in a pleased voice; "it is as hard and horny as a day-labourer's. Do show it to Belinda!"

He looks towards her, hesitating and uncertain. She has resumed her former seat, and her work-basket.

"Do!" she says, trying to speak with her newly summoned tranquillity; and he holds it out to her, palm upwards.

It is a beautiful hand still, shapely and vigorous, but on it are disfiguring evidences of hard, coarse toil. There is nothing particularly affecting in a work-roughened palm: it is a condition to which are subjected the hands of ninety-nine out of every hundred of the human race; and yet, as she looks at it, she has much ado to prevent the tears from springing to her eyes.

"You know," he says, "I told you that I could not stand the confinement of an office life!"

"*We know?*" cries Sarah, pricking up her ears. "*You told us?* What do you

mean? When have you ever had the chance of telling us?"

He stops—staggered and white. He had forgotten the presence of an auditor. Nor is Belinda in a plight to help him.

"I mean," he says floundering, "that I — I intended to tell you; and so," hurriedly resuming his narrative, "I — I went as an ordinary hand in the iron-works; and was set to work at the puddling-furnace."

"The puddling-furnace!" cries Sarah, delighted with the sound; "and what is a *puddling-furnace*, pray?" repeating the phrase with emphatic relish.

"A puddling-furnace is a furnace where the pig-iron from the smelting-furnace is worked about at a great heat with iron rakes—*rabbles*, they call them—and I had the honour and pleasure," with a shy laugh, "of working one of these rakes, until the iron became malleable."

Belinda's pretence of work has dropped unheeded on the grass beside her.

"H—m!" says Sarah, still agreeably in-

terested; "no wonder that your hands are not so pretty as they might be. And was it very hard work?"

"It was not exactly child's play," he answers drily; "but they gave us high wages; they were glad to get hold of a good strong chap like me. We had need to be pretty strong!"

"And did you work at it all day?"

"We were relieved every six or eight hours. We could not have stood it longer on account of the heat; that *was* pretty bad!"

He pauses a moment, passing his disfigured hand, half in absence, half in kindness, along Slutty's roomy back; then adds:

"It is the heat that does it! As a rule, puddlers do not live long; it is the heat that does it."

He says it with complete simplicity, neither expecting nor wishing for compassion; as if to spend eight hours a day in a puddling-furnace were the natural and ordinary sequel of an education at Eton and Oxbridge.

So this is how he has spent the twenty months, passed by her in listening for the postman's knock—in this life-shortening, mind-deadening brute toil! Well, even so, he has had the best of it!

There is a silence of some moments' duration, broken by Sarah, whose sharp ear has caught a sound of footsteps.

"Ha!" she cries with animation, "here comes my little flock; and, as ill-luck will have it, I have forgotten every one of their names. Belinda! quick! help me!—which is which?"

Belinda lifts her downcast eyes: lifts them to see three young gentlemen, whom apparently the parlour-maid, with that contempt for undergraduates inherent in the native Oxbridge mind, has left to announce themselves, timorously advancing. They are evidently not very easy in their minds, and are somewhat obviously each pushing the other to the front.

Clearly, Professor Forth's house is no habitual lounge for undergraduates. A

movement of irrational relief thrills through Rivers' heart as he realizes this.

"They must indeed be fond of you, Sarah, to have faced me!" says Mrs. Forth, with a dry smile. "How frightened they look! as frightened," with one quick glance at Rivers, "as *you* used to be!"

She does not pause to see the effect of her words; but, rising, walks with her long slow step to meet her guests.

"I do not wonder that they are frightened," says Sarah in a stage aside to the young man. "Does not she look as if she were going to ask them to what she owes the pleasure of their visit? If I do not fly to the rescue, even now they will turn tail and run!"

But Sarah for once is mistaken. They have no desire to turn tail and run. It is doubtful, indeed, whether, on their homeward way, and over their evening cigars, their limited and artless vocabulary of encomium is more strained to find epithets of approval for Miss Churchill than for her

austerer sister. But indeed, to-day, Belinda is not austere.

"Why should she snub them?" she asks herself sadly; "has not she had enough of snubbing people for all her lifetime?"

And so she is kind to them—too kind, Rivers begins presently to think with a jealous pang, as he sees her pouring out tea for them with her all-lovely hands; endowing them with her heavenly smile; lightening their darkness with her starry eyes. Nor is he, even yet, wise enough in love's lore, or coxcomb enough, to suspect that it is he himself—he sitting by, apparently neglected and overlooked—who has lit the eyes and carved the smile.

Sarah is very kind, too; but they are rather hurt at the hopeless muddle into which she has got their names.

By-and-by, when well be-tea'd and be-caked, they are embarked upon a game of tennis, and the sound of callings and laughings, of balls struck and racquets striking, breaks the Arcadian silence of that hitherto virgin enclosure—Professor Forth's tennis-

ground. It is too small to admit of more than one set at a time; and Belinda, as a good hostess, despite the warm urgencies of the now tamed and happy strangers, retires in favour of her visitors. It boots little to inquire whether the sacrifice cost her much.

"Do *you* play?" cries Sarah nonchalantly, flourishing her racquet under Rivers' nose. "No? Ah!" with an impudent smile, "you are more at home with your *rake!*"

Though it is morally impossible that they could have understood it, both Bellairs and Stanley are contemptible enough to laugh at this sally; a fact which would no doubt have made Rivers disposed to punch their heads, had he heard them; but the jest and its prosperity both fall upon deaf ears. Sight and hearing are stopped by the anxious fear:

"Is she displeased with him for refusing to play? Ought he to have played? Will she now expect him to go? At parting, will she say any word of further meeting?"

A lump rises in his throat. Not presuming again to take up his place on the grass at her feet—though, after all, it is a privilege that no one grudges even to the dogs—he stands, uncertain and unhappy, before her. If she so wills it, this must be the end. Nor does she seem in any hurry to put him out of his incertitude.

Upon her the day's earlier mood is returning. In what life-giving whiffs comes the kindly wind! Did ever homely coated bird say such sweet things as does the blackbird from among the cherry-boughs? and the little vulgar villa-garden has grown like that of which Keats spake:

> "Where the daisies are rose-scented,
> And the rose herself has got
> Perfume that on earth is not!"

He is here before her, waiting one lightest sign from her to lie down at her feet and be trampled on. Is it any wonder that, being a woman, she lets three minutes elapse before she gives that sign?

At the end of that time, "Are you at it still?" she asks abruptly.

It is half an hour since the subject was dropped, and a dozen others have intervened between; yet he seems to have no difficulty in understanding at once to what her speech alludes.

"No," he answers, with a sigh of relief (for it is evident that had she wished to be rid of him, she would not have introduced a new, or resumed an old, topic), taking possession as he speaks of Sarah's forsaken chair; "I am promoted to be foreman."

He pauses for her to comment or congratulate; but she does neither. She only stitches feverishly on.

"It struck me that the same thing might be done, with much less expense of labour, by machinery," he continues, with the hurry of one who has no assurance that he is not wearying his listener; "and in consequence of this—this invention of mine, which our firm has taken up, I have been promoted to the rank of foreman."

He stops so decidedly that she is compelled to make an observation of some kind.

"And in due time, of course, you will be taken into partnership, and marry your master's daughter," she says with a difficult flippancy.

The blood rushes to his face. He had expected a kinder commentary. Surely no jest ever so ill became her whom, in his eyes, all becomes. There is a silence. The sun's rays are less vertical, and the dogs have awoke. Punch indeed, under the mistaken idea of being obliging, is officiously retrieving the tennis balls, and being warmly slapped by the heated players for his good nature.

"Well," says Belinda, with nervous asperity in her tone, "is there nothing more? Go on."

"Others have invented machines of the same kind," he continues spiritlessly, for her jest has taken the heart out of his narration, "but they have turned out either complete failures, or only very partial successes; if mine has better luck, our firm holds out hopes of taking out a

patent, and giving me a small share of the business."

"Did not I tell you so?" cries she, laughing rather stridently; "why, my prophecy is already half-way towards fulfilment."

Again his face burns, but he deigns her no answer. If she can stoop to so unworthy a merriment, she shall at least enjoy it alone.

"It is evidently all for the best," he says, trying to catch her callous tone; "it seems that I have a kind of turn for mechanics. It was news to me that I had a turn for anything convertible into money. If—if things had gone smoothly, I might have lain down in my grave without finding out where the bent of my genius lay: and that would have been a thousand pities, would not it?"

He ends with a laugh. Her mirth, which had offended him, has long died; nor has she any answer ready to his question. Her long arms (even arms can look sad) lie listless on her lap, and her

great veiled eyes see visions. Vanished from before them are the little square garden and the tennis-players. They see only his future life-path stretching before her; his life growing ever fuller, fuller, fuller of busy, prospering, eager work, with ever less and less room in it for the gap left by her. By-and-by that gap will close altogether. The sooner the better for him!

But for *her?* Over her there pours a rush of frantic longing to tear it wide; to keep it ever, ever yawning. But it will not so yawn always. It will close so that scarce a scar will be left to show where it once was. He is fond of his work already. In how different a spirit he addresses himself to it from that in which, sulky and half-hearted, she turns to her hated toils. A sense of injury and offence against him rises in her heart. He can never have suffered as she has suffered; his meat has never been ashes, nor his drink tears!

"It is clear that you are Fortune's favourite," she says in a hard voice; "I congratulate you."

"Thank you," he answers, deeply wounded; "you have hit upon the exact phrase that describes me."

There is such a sharp pain in his tone, that, though she has been anxiously averting her eyes from him, they must needs seek his in apology.

"Forgive me," she says with a remorseful watery smile; "you know that I was always bitter; and somehow," her lip trembling, "time has not improved me!"

Seeing the sorrowful twitching of that lovely and beloved mouth, he loses his head for a moment.

"It would have been nothing from anyone else," he says, murmuring under his breath; "but it came ill from you."

She offers no denial. Only she drops her eyes; and a stealing selfish sweetness laps her senses. Not yet, then, is the gap filled.

"Belinda!" cries the voice of Sarah, suddenly striking in, high and mirthful; of Sarah, returned, hot and boastful, from

her finished game. "Cheer up! I have some good news for you!"

Belinda gives a great start.

"Have you indeed?" she says hurriedly; "so much the better for me."

"Mr. Staveley and Mr. Bellairs and Mr.——" (she has not yet mastered the name of her third young friend, but audaciously mumbles something that is to stand for it), "and I have concocted a little junket for to-morrow. If it is not your birthday it ought to be! You are going to be taken on the river, and treated to cakes and ale at a pot-house, and towed back by moonlight. Come now, what do you say? are not you grateful?"

Belinda laughs nervously.

"Grateful! of course I am!"

She has risen from her chair and begun to walk about upon the sward. Perhaps by changing her position she may the sooner be free of the heady fumes of this mandragora that she has been drinking; may the more easily shake off this divine drowsiness, that yet leads to death.

"It strikes me that you are not listening to a word I say," says Sarah, darting a dry look from one to the other of the culprits.

"Not listening?" repeats Belinda, with a feverish gaiety; "am I not? Judge for yourself whether I am listening! I am to be taken on the river, and treated to cakes and ale, and towed home by moonlight; come, now!"

"Well, is not it a nice plan? are not you grateful to us?" cries Sarah, again appeased and jubilant.

"It would be delightful!" replies Mrs. Forth, still with that same factitious liveliness. "I should enjoy it of all things; I am so fond of the water, only——"

She stops abruptly; her rebellious eye wandering to where Rivers—he, too, has risen—stands aloof, out in the cold; obviously uninvited, unincluded in the joyous programme.

"Only Menander, I suppose," says Sarah, making a face; "really, at his age, he ought to be able to shift for himself for one day."

"It is not Menander," replies Belinda with embarrassment; "as it happens, I have a whole holiday to-morrow. Mr. Forth is going to London for the day, to take the chair at an archæological meeting."

"Only what, then?" looking at her with a point-blank directness that puts her out of countenance.

"Only," she says, and stops again, irresolute.

Reason is pouring her cold douche over her, and asking: "Why should he be invited? What sense would there be in it?—unreason rather, and madness. Has not she supped enough of hemlock for one while? With how many dreary days and weeks of flat revolt and saltless labour will she already have to expiate this one drunken hour? Let this be the end! let this be the end!"

"Only nothing," she says, with awkward gaiety.

"I wonder why you hesitated?" asks Sarah inquisitively. "I cannot fancy ever

hesitating when there is any question of amusing one's self. Do not you often go on the water?"

"Never; I am never asked; you never ask me," turning with a sort of spurious coquetry to the enraptured young men.

"We should be only too delighted," cries Bellairs; he, by right of his one minute's priority of introduction, having constituted himself spokesman and old acquaintance; "only we—we—were afraid, we—we—did not venture!"

"You must venture for the future, then," replies she with a flighty laugh. "You must take me often! I want to go! I want to enjoy myself!"

Her eye sparkles, and her cheek flames, as she speaks. Is it indeed the expectation of pleasure that has set them both so bravely alight? She throws herself with such a fury of interest into all the details of the excursion, that she has hardly time or attention to spare for bidding good-bye to Rivers, who presently comes up to make his adieux.

"Are you going?" she asks indifferently. "Good-bye."

As she speaks, she lays for one instant her hot dry hand in his cold one. She would have bidden even Bellairs good-bye more warmly. None but herself knows the strength of the temptation that assails her to clutch that poor slighted hand before them all; to lay it on her miserable heart; to drown it in her tears, smother it with her kisses, and pay it any other tribute of extravagant passionate homage.

Least of all does he suspect it, as he walks away, decently strangling his sick despair till he is out of sight. No sooner is he gone, and the need for defence ended, than she throws away her weapons. Her attention flags so obviously; her manner relapses so patently from its short summer of animation into its normal frost, that it dawns at length upon the three boys' intelligence that they are running a good chance of outstaying their welcome, and forfeiting the place that they flatter themselves they have won in Mrs. Forth's esteem.

They take leave as precipitately as Sarah's many last words, commands, *espièglerie*s, jokes, will let them. She accompanies them to the door; and Belinda, since it is more tolerable to move about than to sit still, accompanies her.

The sisters lean on the low iron gate, and the bland spring evening wraps her arms around them.

Belinda has lifted her gloomy eyes to the laburnum gloriously pendent above her head. Which happy cluster was it that brushed against his hair last night in the starlight?

"He is not gone yet!" says Sarah, in that voice of shrewd, dry sense which would surprise the admirers of her butterfly phase, could they hear it. "What is he hanging about for?"

She has desisted rather suddenly from her occupation of kissing her fingers to her three adorers, who, reluctant to lose one of her last glances, are backing down the road away from her. Belinda's heart gives a bound. Not quite the end yet, then!

She has done her best! Her conscience is clear! but it is not quite the end yet, then! Can she be blamed because he still loiters near?

"I suppose the road is public property," she says doggedly; but her voice shakes.

"You did not ask him to join us to-morrow, did you?" asks Sarah, with dry rapidity.

"No."

"Ah!" (drawing a long breath), "that is right!"

"It would have been the merest civility to have invited him," says Mrs. Forth sullenly. A frown less of ill-humour than of perplexed uneasiness has gathered on Miss Churchill's satin brow.

"It is no case of *civility* between you and him," she says curtly.

The flush on Belinda's fagged face grows hotter.

"I am at a loss to understand what you mean," she says angrily.

"I mean," replies Sarah shrewdly, and

enunciating with the greatest clearness, "that discretion is the better part of valour —that is what I mean!"

"Thank you!" cries the other fiercely, and trembling like a leaf from head to foot. "Thank you for us both for your good opinion of us!—*Mr. Rivers!*"

At the last two words she raises her voice into a call; but it is so unsteady and ill-modulated, and he is so comparatively distant, that one would hardly expect the sound to carry so far; but apparently it does, for he starts and looks uncertainly towards her, distrusting his own ears.

Is it likely that she should have called him? she—his high proud lady—after such a careless cruelty of good-bye too!

"Mr. Rivers!" she repeats, in a voice that is as unsteady as before, but louder. There can be no mistake this time. He can no longer distrust his good-luck; and in one second, as if he could not obey her quickly enough, he is hurrying back.

Sarah lifts her arms deliberately from the gate, and rubs them gently to remove the

slight numbness produced by contact with the cold iron.

"Blessed are they who let well alone!" she says, gently raising her shoulders, and turning towards the house. "I have disqualified myself for that benediction; have not I, Slutty?"

So saying, she disappears. Belinda would have liked to ask her to stay, but her pride forbids it. Long before Rivers has reached her, she has repented of her perverse and devil-born impulse. Why has she called him? What has she to say to him when he comes? For the first moment she says nothing.

"You—you called me?" he asks, faltering, surprised at her silence and her strange look.

"Did I?" she says, stammering. "Yes—of course I did! I—I—you leave Oxbridge to-morrow?"

"Do I?" he answers blankly.

Is this, then, what she has called him back for? To tell him that he must not venture into her presence again?

"You must know your own plans best," she says, with a forced laugh; "do not you leave Oxbridge to-morrow?"

"There is no need that I should," he answers diffidently; "I have a week's holiday!"

Her rebel pulses leap. A week! A whole week! She lifts her face, on which the sunset is mirrored, and looks towards the west. On what a couch of fiery damask roses, dying into daffodil, the sun is laying himself down! What a treble sweetness the throstle is putting into his song as he addresses himself to his rest!

"A week!" she says aloud.

"Does a week in two years seem to you such a long holiday?" he asks, rather wounded by what sounds to him the cold wonder of her tone; "it need not be spent here, if——'

He stops abruptly. "*If you do not wish it,*" would be the sentence's natural ending; but so to conclude it would be to suppose an interest, with which he has no

right nor any reason to credit the wife of Professor Forth, in him and his affairs.

She does not ask him how he had meant to finish his phrase. She does not finish it for him. She only stands staring, beneath the level penthouse of her milky hands, at the blinding sunset. What a curve her lifted elbow makes! From what a marvel of wrist and forearm does the lawny sleeve fall back!

"Is this what you called me for?" he asks abruptly; "to tell me that I am to go to-morrow?"

For a minute she stands irresolute, still looking sunwards; her outward woman a lovely pattern of harmony, grace, and quiet; her inward woman, ugly chaos and dark fight. Shall she say "Yes"? To say so would be to more than retrieve her late error. Dimly she feels that if she has one ray of sober reason left her, she will say "Yes." She heaves a sigh, and lets fall her hands. Her lips have all but framed the fateful word, when:

"Belinda! Belinda!" comes an old voice,

calling imperatively peevish from the house.

A week! One poor week! Only a week! What can one week matter? Her manner has suddenly changed.

"It is Mr. Forth!" she says hurriedly. "I called you back," reddening like the western cloud-fleeces, and throwing a guilty look over her shoulder, "to ask you whether, if you were not going to leave Oxbridge to-morrow, you—you would join our party on the water?"

CHAPTER VI.

"Lieb' Liebchen, leg's Händchen auf's Herze mein;
Ach, hörst du wie's pochet in's Kämmerlein?
Da hauset ein Zimmermann schlimm und arg,
Der zimmert mir einen Todtensarg.

"Er hämmert und klopfet bei Tag und bei Nacht,
Er hat mich schon längst um den Schlaf gebracht;
Ach, sputet euch, Meister Zimmermann,
Damit ich balde schlafen kann."

IN other climes, a sunset of suave sublimity usually means that it will be followed by a sunrise as nobly fair. But in our free isle this is not the case. Even the weather will submit to no tyranny, but follows its own wild and freakish will. You may close your eyes upon a distant steady heaven of molten copper and speckless blue; and open them

upon a soaked-blanket sky, half an inch above your head.

During the many wakeful patches that vary the sameness of her night, Belinda has full time to repent of her evening's doings; but not once does it occur to her that the weather may possibly intervene to prohibit the excursion. Among all her half-sincere plans for evading the expedition, the alternative of a wet day has not once suggested itself; and when the morn comes, dim and sad, the poignancy of her disappointment at sight of the dripping bushes and filled flower-cups shows her how much of veracity there was in her projects of abstinence. *Now* she will have to endure the pang of renunciation, without having enjoyed the merit of self-conquest. And yet it is a lovely rain, not harshly driving, nor rudely strewing the earth with a ravin of torn-off petals; but gently stealing down from the cloud-roof overhead, softly thrusting itself between the blossom-lips, feeding the juicy leaves, healthful, wealthful, beneficent, yet execrated by two young

eyes that are morosely watching it. It is execrated by two old ones also. The Professor tentatively throws out an idea as to the advisability of telegraphing to the Archæological Society his inability to preside over its deliberations.

"But you are not sugar or salt!" cries Belinda impatiently, as she stands, a comforter thrown over her arm, and a mackintosh extended to receive her husband's meagre person; "you will be in cabs and trains all day."

"It is not always easy to secure a cab at a moment's notice on a wet day!" replies he, demurring. "As I have often explained to you, it is upon trifles that the laws of health depend; there may be delay enough to allow of my getting my feet thoroughly wet—a circumstance amply sufficient to throw a chill upon a liver already predisposed."

"But will not you be putting the Society to great inconvenience? will not its members be very much disappointed?" asks she, reddening consciously as she speaks.

What is she saying? What does she care whether they are disappointed or not? To what depths of disingenuousness has she—truthful as she has been hitherto counted her life long—already descended? But it may clear—it may clear!

"I might obviate the difficulty by taking an extra pair of socks in my pocket to change at the Club," he says thoughtfully; and then her spirits rise, for he extends his arms, not to take a parting embrace, but to insert them in the waterproof-sleeves which she, with wifely alacrity, holds ready to receive them.

He is gone. That one main obstacle to her pleasure is at all events removed. If only it would clear! She is no longer half-sincere with herself. No longer does she feign a desire to extricate herself from the entanglement into which she has plunged, nor a gratitude to Mother Nature for having come to her aid. Without asking *why* she wishes it, she has concentrated all her being upon the one mastering desire to see that cloud-curtain raise its

trailing corners, transpierced and put to flight by such a sun as yesterday's.

"It does not look in the least like lifting!" she says, in a tone which she in vain tries to make sound careless, to Sarah, as they enter the drawing-room after breakfast. "Do you think that there is any chance of its lifting?"

"Not the slightest!" replies Sarah placidly.

With that adaptability to circumstances which makes life to her one long feast, Miss Churchill has arranged herself for a wet day. A small fire—not unwelcome in the rain-chilled atmosphere—brightens the hearth; and to it she has—for to her nothing is sacred—pulled up the Professor's chair: that one of Mudie's novels which, by its large type, wide margins, and plenitude of titled names, seems to promise the least strain upon the intellect, in her hand.

"Who would have thought it yesterday?" says Mrs. Forth, in a tone of mournful irritation, totally unable to follow her

philosophic sister's example, and fidgeting uneasily about the room.

"Who indeed?" rejoins Sarah equably.

There is something in the indifferent content of her voice that jars upon Belinda's mood. The dogs have taken their cue from Miss Churchill—Punch has got inside the fender as if it were winter; the cat lies lazily stretched just outside the parrot's cage; and Polly, exasperated by her air of calm security, is walking stealthily, head downwards, along the side of his cage, and when he has got, as he thinks, within reach of her, is stretching out first a vicious hooked nose, and then a long crooked grey hand, to make a grab at her whiskers.

Sarah laughs.

"You were so anxious for it yesterday," says Belinda, with an irrationally aggrieved accent.

"Was I?" answers Sarah, yawning. "I am not the least anxious for it now; I am thoroughly comfortable, thank God! Why do not you come near the fire? I have a hundred questions to ask you; we

have the house all to ourselves—excuse" (parenthetically) "my reckoning that among our advantages—and I have scores of good things to tell you about Cannes and granny; you used to be fond of *grannyana!*"

"I am not cold," replies Belinda, avoiding compliance by seating herself where she can at once command the window, and evade her sister's eyes. "Tell them me here."

"Well, you must know," begins Sarah, prudently ignoring this ruse, and launching into her narrative, "that some Poles had the apartment above ours at the hotel, their salon was over granny's bedroom, and every night, at about ten o'clock, they began to dance sarabands, and cancans, and Highland schottisches, and the Lord knows what in it! You know how fond granny is of having her old head danced over when she is courting her beauty sleep."

She pauses to see whether her hearer is listening; it is obvious that she is not, as

for a moment or two she makes no comment, and then, becoming aware of the silence, breaks into a factitious laugh. "Ha! ha!"

"What are you laughing at?" asks Sarah sharply.

"I had not come to the point yet."

The other stops, embarrassed.

"It—it was very good even so far as you had gone," she answers in confusion.

"The end was better still," replies Miss Churchill shortly, taking up her book again; "but you shall never hear it!"

"How ill-natured!" cries Mrs. Forth, advancing eagerly towards the hearth, roused into alarm at her own self-betrayal; "and I—I was so much interested in it. I should like you to begin it all over again."

But Sarah is inexorable. Presently Belinda desists from her importunities, and not daring to return to the window, also takes up a book, occasionally from behind its shelter throwing a desperate eye on the weather.

It is a hopeless wet day. "Once or twice, indeed, there has been a tantalizing thinning of, and movement among, the vapours; but it has ended only in a more resolute, inflexible fastening upon the earth. Eleven —that hour of clearing—has come and gone, and brought no clearing with it. After all, she might as well have done her plain duty, and sent him away. In that case she would at least have had the throbs of an approving conscience to keep her up. And what, pray, has she now?

The forenoon is gone; luncheon is over; they are again in the drawing-room. The novel has long ago dropped from Sarah's fingers, and she has slidden into a warm, infantile slumber. The door-bell, loudly jangling, wakes her with a jump.

"It is those hateful boys!" she cries petulantly, starting up. "Am I never to have any peace from them? and I was in such a beautiful sleep!"

One glance at her sister's face—that sister who has obviously not shared her slumbers; whose watch has been at length

rewarded, though by no brightening of the material sky—tells her who is among "those hateful boys." Perhaps this fact adds a new tinge of ill-humour to her tone, as she advances, childishly rubbing her drowsy eyes with her knuckles, to meet her admirers.

"You woke me!" she says, pouting. "I was in such a beautiful sleep!"

This speech is not calculated to reassure three timid young gentlemen, who have already been questioning the wisdom of their own procedure, and doubtfully discussing among themselves the probabilities as to the mood, whether of summer warmth or December ice, that they will find their hostess in. Upon Sarah, at least, they had counted to stand by them. But aid from an unexpected quarter comes to them.

"Never mind her!" says Belinda, with a young and radiant smile of welcome and re-assurance. "What business has she to be asleep? A wet day? Yes, it is a wet day; but what delicious warm rain! how

much good it will do to the country! the farmers are crying out for rain!"

This is the way in which she now regards the lately-execrated downpour. Is *he* not here? and whether in sunny boat on flashing river, gathering fritillaries in the water-meadows, or in little rain-darkened early-English drawing-room, is not it now all one to her?

"Vivre ensemble d'abord,
C'est le bien nécessaire et réel,
Après on peut choisir au hasard
Ou la terre ou le ciel!"

"I hope you will forgive our calling so early," says Bellairs, a little relieved, but still not very comfortable in his spirits; "we—we wanted to know what you thought about the river."

"*About the river!*" cries Sarah, still cross and sleepy, casting a sarcastic glance, first at the weather, and then at the young man; "are we frogs, or young ducks?"

He looks so silly, that Miss Churchill laughs, her good-humour at once restored.

"Now that you are here, you may as

well stay," she says, in a thoroughly wide-awake voice; "may not they, Belinda? If we depend upon the charms of conversation, I shall be asleep again in ten minutes; why should not we play games?"

"Why not?" responds Belinda readily.

Her cheeks are pink, and her eyes dancing. There is no pastime, however wildly, childishly hilarious, for which she is not in tune.

"Shouting Proverbs!" suggests Sarah joyously. "Not know Shouting Proverbs?" (with a reproving look at Staveley, who has murmured this objection). "Why, everybody shouts, and one guesses!" (in lucid explanation). "It makes a tremendous noise; I do not know that it has any other merit."

"The neighbours would indict us for a nuisance," says Belinda gaily, shaking her head. "Russian Scandal?"

"It does not make noise enough," says Sarah; "it is nothing but whispering; we will have no whispering" (rather curtly, and with an almost imperceptible glance

towards Rivers, in application of the warning).

"Hare and Hounds is not a bad game in a house," says Mr. De Lisle, in a small, shy voice. "We played Hare and Hounds at a house I was staying at the other day; we ran all through every room, from attic to cellar; it was great fun!"

"Your friend evidently did not keep a mother-in-law out of repair upstairs," replies Sarah, dismissing at once, though with leniency, this not very bright suggestion; "*we* do. What does the company say to Post, eh?"

The company, who are one and all in the mood for riotous jollity in any form, hail the proposal with one-voiced effusion; and it is on the point of being carried into execution, when Miss Churchill suggests an improvement upon it.

"Why not dance? dancing is better than any games! Surely some one can play, or even whistle a tune, or set the musical-box tinkling out its one waltz. Room? plenty of room! too much room!

'Wheel all the furniture out into the passage!"

No sooner said than done. Away trundles the early English suite of rush-bottomed chairs; away the Professor's sacred *fauteuil!* away Belinda's work-table! everything but the piano and the music-stool, to which little De Lisle, having weakly admitted that he can play a little dance music, is at once ruthlessly nailed.

The rain patters, snow-soft outside. The valse strikes up. There is a moment's hesitation. Bellairs and Staveley, generously unwilling to steal a march upon each other, hang back; but Sarah settles the point by frisking up to the one nearest to her—it is all one to her with which she dances; it happens to be Bellairs—and swoops away with him smooth and sure as a swallow darting down upon a moth. Without a word exchanged between them, Belinda finds herself in Rivers' arms. The rain plash-plashes upon the open window's sill. How long it is since she has danced! How madly exhilarating are

motion and measure! Is it in heaven or upon earth that that lame waltz is being strummed? After a turn or two he feels her light and buoyant body grow heavy in his embrace.

"Stop!" she says dizzily; "the room goes round."

He obeys at once; and fearing lest she may fall, keeps for one moment his arm around her.

"It is so long since I danced," she says, lifting one white hand to her giddy eyes; "so long! so long! not since——"

She breaks off.

"Not since your——"

He also breaks off. But she is none the less firmly and irrevocably wed, because of his inability to say "your marriage."

"Not since long before then," rejoins she, hurriedly interrupting, with a nervous dread lest he may complete the phrase; "not since—Dresden."

"But we never danced in—Dresden," he says, making the same slight pause as

she had done before the name of the, to them, sacred city.

"*You* did not, perhaps," she answers with a charming saucy smile—for under the unwonted joyous excitement her spirits are towering perilously high—"but *I* did. Some Gardereiters came in one evening, and I took a turn with two of them; it was before your day."

Distant as is the epoch alluded to, and satisfactorily as he had been persuaded at the time by ocular evidence of the reciprocal indifference of Belinda and the Saxon officers, he cannot avoid a feeling of biting jealousy and offence against those innocent and both in time and space far-off German valseurs.

"At least it is *my* day now," he says with emphasis; and she offering no contradiction, away they float into their trance again.

The valse ends; the patient De Lisle begins to hammer out a galop. They must part; for Bellairs, emboldened thereto by Sarah's warm approbation, is inviting

Belinda, and she dare not refuse. Rivers dances with Miss Churchill. Why need he? Why need he dance at all? Why, above all, need he throw such spirit and animation into his dancing? He looks as if he were enjoying himself as much as Sarah. Staveley, after having vainly endeavoured to educate Slutty into a partner (Slutty, on unwilling hind-legs, and with tail abjectly tucked in, perhaps in the laudable intention of giving herself a more human air), galops bravely by himself. The galop ends. The musician, bringing out of his treasures things new and old, treats them to a venerable polka.

Once more he and she are together; and in what a different spirit her light feet now move! Bellairs had found her but a disappointing partner; inert, and often begging to be allowed to stop and take breath. In Rivers' arms, her life's tides are running at their highest. It is Staveley's turn to be Sarah's *danseur*, and Bellairs, emulating his friend's former example, polks alone. But not altogether

with his friend's success. For Punch, inspired by a scientific curiosity to investigate the strange phenomena that have appeared on his horizon, unhappily runs between his legs, and brings him to the earth with some clamour. The player stops: the dancers pause.

"We have had enough of this," says Sarah, drawing her sister into the window for an aside, and speaking with some brusqueness; "it is not fair upon that poor boy" (indicating De Lisle); "he is getting cross, though he tries not to show it. As I have not three legs and arms like the Isle of Man, I cannot dance with them all at once, and *you* are not much help! Let us try something else."

"By all means," answers Belinda hurriedly, shrinking away from the reproach that her conscience tells her she sorichly deserves; "anything! whatever you please!"

"The ball is ended," says Sarah authoritatively, returning to the young men, and clapping her hands to enforce silence;

"but if the company pleases it will be immediately followed by some athletic sports. What does everyone say to a game of Blind Man's Buff?"

This second proposal is received with an enthusiasm as much hotter than the former as may be expected from the universal loosening of the bonds of shyness and conventionality which has taken place since that former one was first made.

Sarah at once volunteers to be blindfolded; and in two minutes she is established in the middle of the little room, a Liberty silk handkerchief tied over her jovial eyes, and her hands outstretched in futile blind groping and grabbing.

The rest of the party, in the most approved fashion, pull her gown, tweak her hair, nip her sleeve; but not for long. With one well-directed lunge—so well directed as to rouse an instant loud cry of dishonesty—she has pounced upon Bellairs, who in his turn is blindfolded—is in his turn tweaked and nipped—and in his turn catches Rivers; Rivers catches Belinda.

The fun waxes fast and furious. They have raised every grain of dust latent in the carpet; Punch is cheering them on by volleys of delighted short barks, while Slutty sits wretchedly in a corner with her face to the wall.

Most madly mirthful of all—most intemperately gay, out-Heroding Herod, outdoing Sarah in her wildest mood, with splendid poppy-cheeks and lightening eyes—is Mrs. Forth. She has been old so long—so long! She is making up the arrears of her lost youth.

The clamour is at its loudest. Scarcely less blowzed—bawling scarcely less noisily than were the Primrose family in neighbour Flamborough's kitchen, when annihilated by the entrance of Lady Blarney and Miss Caroline Wilhelmina Amelia Skeggs—is the society gathered on that wet May afternoon in Professor Forth's decent drawing-room.

Belinda, caught for the second time, stands blind-folded in the middle of the room, while shouts of uproarious laughter

greet her vain efforts to gain hold of any of the assailants who lustily beset her. All of a sudden, in one instant there is silence. The pushing, and jostling, and nipping have altogether ceased. Without any attempt at resistance some one is in her clasp.

"I have got you!" cries she, in a voice of jubilant triumph; "who are you?" and so tears the bandage from her eyes.

It is indeed true that she is grasping Rivers' coat-sleeve in indisputable conquest: but, at the moment that she verifies this fact, the cause of his having fallen so easy a prey, the cause of the instantaneous and entire muteness that has fallen upon the so boisterous little assemblage, breaks in horror upon her stunned eyes.

The door is half open, and through it Professor Forth is looking, with an expression hard to qualify upon his face, at the entertainment got up with such spirit and success in his absence. Not for long, however. In a moment he has softly closed the door again and withdrawn. For several

moments they stand staring at each other speechless and aghast.

Belinda's look wanders in consternation from one to other of the faces round her. Disordered hair, red-hot cheeks, panting breath, rampagious eyes! Bedlam might easily turn out a saner-looking party. In comparison of them Cornus' crew were an orderly Philistine band.

The men are bad enough, but Sarah—but herself! Bacchante and romp mixed in just and fine proportions as her sister looks, her stricken conscience tells her that she herself far outdoes her, though she dares not ask the looking-glass for confirmation of this conviction; but during the past mad hour has not Sarah been tame and mild when compared with her?

"Had not we better be going?" says Bellairs at last, in a lamb's voice, in which no one would recognise the hilarious bellow of five minutes ago.

"I think that there can be no two opinions on that head," replies Sarah drily. As she speaks she turns to her dazed elder,

and lowers her voice. "Had not you better go and ask him whether he feels inclined to join us?"

Belinda turns in stupid compliance towards the door. As she makes her difficult way through the little passage, blocked with articles of furniture piled one atop of another, her consternation deepens. He must have had to climb like a cat over his own armchair in order to gain ingress into his own drawing-room! It is impossible! It would be adding insult to injury to present herself before him in her present dishevelment. She must needs repair to her own room; must needs, with intense repugnance, snatch a glance at her own disordered image in the toilet-glass. The case is even worse than she had feared. There is even more of the Mœnad than she had apprehended in her reflection. But there is no time to be lost. Each moment that passes, leaving her offence unacknowledged, lends it a deeper dye. A brush snatched up and hastily applied to her revolted hair; two hand-palms, but

they are hot too, held for a moment to her blazing cheeks in the vain effort to cool them, and she is off again.

Outside his door she hesitates an instant, listening in scared heart-sinking; but there is no sound audible within, so, plucking up what courage she may, she enters. He is seated at his writing-table, in the leathern chair in which she has passed such countless hours of *ennui* and fatigue, slaving in his service. The thought emboldens her a little, and she advances up the room and stands beside him.

"May I take your place?" she asks in a rather faltering voice. "I am quite ready."

It is a whole minute before he answers. There is no plainer mode of showing resentment than by letting sixty seconds elapse between a question addressed to you and your answer. Then:

"I am obliged to you," he answers woodenly, still writing; "but I think that, in its present condition, your mind is scarcely capable of serious employment!"

There is something so galling in the implication that her spirit rises.

"Do you think that I am *drunk?*" she asks violently; then, recollecting how gravely in the wrong she has been, she masters herself, and says apologetically: "I am very sorry; it was very foolish; but—but—I did not expect you home by so early a train."

He gives a little odious, though perhaps pardonable, laugh.

"That fact was sufficiently obvious."

"I am very sorry," she repeats again, with uneasy iteration, shifting wretchedly from one foot to the other, as she stands in her culpritship before him; "but—but it was so wet, and we could not get out, and —and it was so long since I had danced or played at any games!"

There is a wistful accent audible even to herself in her voice, and she looks at him with a sort of forlorn hope that he may be touched by it. If he is, he masters it admirably.

"Indeed!" he answers cuttingly. "Well,

next time that such an impulse seizes you, I should be obliged by your choosing some other spot than my house to turn into a bear-garden!"

She had thought that her cheeks were already as hot as cheeks could be, but the sudden influx of blood that his words send pulsing into them shows her her mistake. Hitherto, shame at and repentance of her frolic, joined with a sincere desire to make amends for it, have been her predominant emotions; now at once they vanish, and give place to a biting sense of injustice and aversion.

"After all, it was no such great crime," she says in a hard voice, in which is no trace of the gentle, humble key of her earlier utterance; "it was silly, perhaps," with a burning blush, "but it was an innocent enough wet-day amusement!"

"It is an innocent wet-day amusement against the recurrence of which I shall take measures to secure myself," he replies resentfully.

There is something, or she fancies so, of

menacing in his tone, at which her gorge rises.

"You forget," she says, in a low but extremely distinct voice, "that I am young. If you had married a wife of your own age, it would have been different; but you must remember that I am at the beginning of life, and you at the end!" Having delivered herself of this amiable reminder, she walks towards the door, not giving one glance to see how far her shaft has gone home. On reaching her own room she breaks into hysterical sobbing. "If he had taken it differently, he might have made a friend for life of me!" she cries.

This is, perhaps, putting it a little strongly.

END OF VOL. II.

BILLING AND SONS, PRINTERS, GUILDFORD AND LONDON.
J. D. & Co.

00075828

Digitized with financial assistance from the
Government of Maharashtra
on 18 July, 2018